Vandal kingdom, but the expedition had failed. When Leo died on 18 January 474, five years later, the treasuries of the eastern capital were still empty. He had mobilized all his reserves, leaving nothing for a second attempt.

According to Procopius, the failure of the Byzantine armada was due to treachery on the part of Basiliscus: he was handsomely paid by Geiseric to agree to a five-day truce, whose sole purpose was to allow time for the wind to change round to the right direction for the fireships. But in Roman historiography great disasters are often blamed on treachery – another instance of that tendency to look to the virtues and vices of individuals when seeking causes. Procopius similarly blamed the Vandals' arrival in North Africa in 429 on the treachery of Boniface, but this charge is certainly baseless. Basiliscus also, in January 475, seized the eastern Empire from Leo's successor Zeno, and hung on to it until summer 476, at which point Zeno regained his throne. This condemned Basiliscus to go down in history as a usurper, and blaming him for the debacle of 468 then became an easy option. The causes of Roman defeat were probably more prosaic: a mixture of bad luck with the wind, unimaginative tactics in trying to land so close to Carthage that there could be no element of surprise, and overambition.[41]

WHETHER THE PREDESTINED result of a flawed conception or the contingent outcome of bad luck with the weather, the failure of the Byzantine armada doomed one half of the Roman world to extinction. Not that everybody realized this instantly. When a state of affairs has prevailed for over five hundred years – the time separating us from Christopher Columbus – it is hard to believe that it can vanish overnight. The situation was, however, hopeless. Constantinople had no more money with which to mount a further rescue. The resources now controlled by Anthemius and Ricimer amounted to little more than the Italian peninsula and the island of Sicily – entirely insufficient, as a source of revenue, to support a military force powerful enough to keep in line Visigoths and Burgundians, Vandals and Suevi, not to mention assorted local Romans – all the centrifugal elements, in fact, now running riot within the western imperial borders. Basiliscus' defeat had destroyed the last chance of regenerating a dominant imperial force. In the decade after 468, despite the political and cultural inertia that made a world without Rome difficult to conceive, different people

different places gradually got to grips with the fact that the western Empire no longer existed.

The Unravelling of Empire 468–476: The Frontier

SOME OF THE first to realize the truth were Roman provincials living on the frontier. Historical and archaeological sources allow us to spotlight one particular group: the inhabitants of Noricum. This province comprised the foothill zone between the outer slopes of the Alps and the River Danube in what is now Lower Austria. Here the beautiful, fertile valleys of the Danube tributaries stretch towards Europe's highest mountains: a stunning landscape. Into this magical Sound of Music country sometime in the mid- to late 450s wandered a mysterious Holy Man by the name of Severinus (we met him fleetingly in Chapter 8). Severinus refused to say anything about his origins, except that he had trained as an ascetic far away in the eastern deserts; but we do know that he spoke beautiful Latin.[42] From the man himself no writings survive, but about a generation after his death one of his acolytes, a monk called Eugippius, wrote a memoir of the saint's life. Severinus died in January 482, and Eugippius was writing in 509/11. Eugippius hadn't been one of the saint's close companions, but he was present at his death and had access to stories told by those who knew him better. What Eugippius produced was a disjointed account of Severinus' life and miracles – hardly a biography, but it is packed with incidents that vividly evoke life in a frontier region as the tide of Empire ebbed away.

The old kingdom of Noricum had been founded about 400 BC when the Celtic-speaking Norici had established their dominance over a native population of Illyrian-speakers. In strategic terms, it was something of a backwater. It did control some routes over the Alps, but not the main ones running west and particularly east of it over the Julian Alps, whose lower slopes and wider passes offer much easier communications between Italy and the Middle Danube basin. Within its borders, though, were situated some important iron mines, and from the second century BC lively trade links had grown up between it and northern Italy, especially the city of Aquileia. This led to generally good relations between Noricum and the Roman Republic, evident not least in the permanent presence of large numbers of Roman traders

at the royal residence from which the kingdom was run, the Magdalensburg.

Noricum was a Roman ally until the time of Augustus, when in 15 BC it was peacefully absorbed into the Empire. Since it was neither hostile to Rome nor sitting astride the major Alpine highways into Italy, Romanization took a different form here from that in Rome's other Danubian provinces. There was no major Roman army stationed here, for instance, and hence no hothouse economy driven by state spending on infrastructure and soldiers' pay packets. Nonetheless, roads were built and Roman-style towns sprang up in the same way we have observed everywhere else in the Empire: about one part central planning to eight parts local initiative. The province was badly hit during the Marcomannic War of the 160s and 170s AD (see pp. 97–8), and acquired a much more substantial garrison afterwards, but this did not affect the basic pattern of its development. By the late Roman period, Noricum was a province of smallish, moderately prosperous agricultural towns. Its landowning class spoke Latin, a reasonable elementary education could be got in the larger towns, and the region still swam in the mainstream of Empire. The best of the late Roman archaeological discoveries in the area is a Christian pilgrimage centre of the late fourth and fifth centuries, discovered on top of the Hemmaburg. Recent excavations have unearthed here three huge basilicas, and inscriptions commemorating the local donors responsible for their construction.[43]

For Noricum, as for so many other parts of the Roman west, the fifth century came as a nasty shock. It seems to have survived the major invasions in quite good shape. There was a moment in the late 400s when Alaric had his eye on the province as a suitable settlement zone for his Goths (see Chapter 5), but that never materialized and the Visigoths ended up in Aquitaine instead. Otherwise, precisely because there were better routes available on either side, the Noricans were able to be mere spectators as the waves of barbarians rolled past. The invaders of 406 moved north up the Danube valley and over the Rhine into Gaul, and Attila did the same in 451. Radagaisus, Alaric and their Gothic groups hurled themselves into northern Italy through Pannonia so as to take advantage of the passes through the Julian Alps, as did Attila in 452. Nonetheless, the first half of the fifth century witnessed a massive erosion in the general level of security enjoyed by the Norican provincials.

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THE PATTERN of settlement and order in Noricum – its spread of towns and agriculture – was the product of the military power of the Roman Empire. Round about the year 400, as recorded in the Notitia Dignitatum, the province was protected by a substantial garrison army (limitanei). Detachments of two legions provided the backbone of its defence: the Second Italica at Lauriacum (Lorsch) and Lentia (Linz), the First Noricorum at Adiuvense (Ybbs). Both legions included units of river police (liburnarii) stationed at three separate points on the river, and there were other fleet units. In addition, three infantry cohorts, four units of ordinary cavalry and two of mounted archers were stationed in the province, amounting, all told, to a force of close on 10,000 men, with a wide range of weaponry.[44]

In the Life of Severinus, beginning in the mid- to late 450s, there is not much evidence of this command. One unspecified military unit is mentioned at Faviana, modern Mautern (where the Notitia Dignitatum mentions river police belonging to the First Noricorum), and another stationed at Batavis (Passau), just beyond the border of Noricum in the province of Raetia (where the Notitia lists an infantry cohort). That's all: nowhere near 10,000 men, despite the fact that much of the Life is taken up with hostile contacts between Noricans and various barbarian outsiders. There's reason, in fact, to be just a little suspicious of this apparent absence of a decent-sized force. Since the whole point of the Life was to celebrate Severinus' ability to stop barbarians terrorizing the population of Noricum, the presence of a largish army in the province would tend to spoil that narrative line. And I strongly suspect that, at least at the start of Severinus' time in the province, there were a few more units around than the two that get a passing mention in the Life. Nonetheless, there is a broad range of evidence indicating that by the death of Attila, the Norican army was much reduced. It also makes clear how and why this had happened.

For one thing, archaeological evidence, particularly from the military installations, has shown that coin circulation collapsed in the province shortly after the year 400. The only partial exception to this was the old legionary base at Lauriacum. As we know, the Roman Empire produced coin above all for paying its army, so that a disturbance in the coin supply may well reflect disruption to military pay. The one exception suggests the same thing: since Lauriacum was the military command centre of the province, you would expect military units to

survive there if nowhere else. A reduced military presence is also sug-
gested by clear archaeological signs of greater insecurity. Shortly after
400, all the villas in Noricum (those so far excavated, at least) were
abandoned or destroyed. Isolated, wealthy and undefended manor
houses, which is what villas essentially were, provided an obvi-
ous target for raiders, and could not survive without a certain level of
security. As we saw earlier, villas disappeared equally quickly in much
of the Balkans at the time of the Gothic war of 376–82.

This doesn't mean that all their former owners were necessarily
killed and the landowning class eliminated. Rural surveys in Noricum
have demonstrated, on the contrary, that building in the fifth century
switched to the construction of what Germanophone archaeologists
call *Fliehburgen*, 'refuge centres'. These are substantial walled settle-
ments, sometimes built with permanent occupation in mind, placed in
highly defensible positions, usually on hill tops and frequently with a
church at their centre. There were a few *Fliehburgen* in favoured spots
to the north, close to the Danube, but most were further south,
nestling in the Alpine foothills south of the River Drava in East Tirol
and Carinthia. The largest of all was at Lavant-Kirchbichl, a settlement
that replaced the old Roman town of Aguntum, where powerful
defences surrounded an area of 2.7 hectares atop an almost inaccessible
crag, with houses, storehouses and an episcopal church 40 metres
long.[45] The *Life* has Severinus giving the following advice to inhabitants
of the countryside around Lauriacum in the 460s:[46]

> The man of God, by the divine inspiration of his prophetic mind,
> instructed them to bring all their modest belongings within the
> walls so that the enemy on their deadly expedition, finding no
> means of human support, would at once be compelled by famine
> to give up their cruel plans.

The evidence suggests that the Noricans didn't really need Severinus'
promptings, but had been busy constructing refuge centres since the
start of the century: an appropriate response to the inability of such
military garrisoning as there was in the province to protect Roman life
there.

Much of the action of the *Life of Severinus* takes place against a
backdrop in which small walled settlements, *castella* – the contempor-
ary term for the archaeologists' *Fliehburgen* – provide the basic form of
settlement being used to protect Roman life. The *Life* also makes clear

that, by the 460s, the citizens of these small towns had become
responsible for their own protection, putting together small forces to
defend their walls – citizen militias, in fact. Walls and/or citizen guards
are mentioned at Comagenis, Faviana, Lauriacum, Batavis and Quin-
tanis. Another defensive option – paralleling that taken by Romano-
Britons in similar circumstances – was for citizens to hire barbarian
warbands to defend their town for them. This is mentioned only in
the case of Comagenis on the Norican frontier, and, as in Britain too,
led to trouble. The *Life* opens with the people of Comagenis depicted
as sorely oppressed by their protectors' demands. They were lucky
enough, with a bit of divine assistance mediated by the saint, to be
able to drive the barbarians out.[47] (If the Romano-British had been able
to do the same, then Welsh, rather than English, might now be the
language of computers and world communication.)

In the early 460s, some Roman military survived in the province,
but nothing like the substantial force listed in the *Notitia*. One factor
in the decline of this Norican army shows up in that work itself. The
field army of Illyricum in about 420, the time of Flavius Constantius,
included among its pseudocomitatensian legions two regiments of
lanciarii (lancers) who had previously been stationed at Lauriacum and
Comagenis. Their withdrawal was part of Constantius' response to the
heavy losses suffered by western field armies in the years after 406.[48]
After 420, it is impossible to follow the history of the western army in
detail, but the loss of North Africa certainly forced Aetius into another
round of belt-tightening, which would have led the central authorities
in Italy to withdraw yet more units from the Norican garrison. And
this surely happened at other crisis moments too. Equally important
was the effect – on Noricum as everywhere else – of declining revenues
at the centre. The *Life* includes a much quoted but nonetheless fantastic
vignette of the last moments of one particular unit of frontier garrison
troops:

> At the time when the Roman Empire was still in existence, the
> soldiers of many towns were supported by public money for
> their watch along the wall [the Danube frontier]. When this
> arrangement ceased, the military formations were dissolved and,
> at the same time, the wall was allowed to break down. The gar-
> rison of Batavis, however, still held out. Some of these had gone
> to Italy to fetch for their comrades the last payment, but on

their way they had been routed by the barbarians, and nobody knew. One day when St Severinus was reading in his cell, he suddenly closed the book and began to sigh heavily and to shed tears. He told those who were present to go speedily to the river [the Inn], which, as he declared, was at that hour red with human blood. And at that moment, the news arrived that the bodies of the said soldiers had been washed ashore by the current of the river.

As with all the episodes in the Life, this is impossible to date precisely. But when central funds began to run out, the surviving garrison troops just disbanded themselves. As the flow of cash slowed to a trickle, soldiers were paid less and less frequently (prompting the ill-fated initiative of the Batavian garrison), and the supply of arms and other essentials declined too. We are told in another anecdote that the tribune in command of the surviving unit at Faviana hesitated to go after marauding barbarians because his men were few and had little weaponry. Severinus told them that all would be well, and that they would simply take the arms of the defeated barbarians.[49] This gives us a notion of what happened to those units of the frontier garrison force that were neither redeployed to field armies nor destroyed in encounters with the enemy. As the financial crisis worsened, deliveries of pay and equipment eventually dried up altogether.

In Noricum, it was sometime in the 460s that the troops disbanded, and my best guess would be that it happened shortly after the defeat of the Byzantine armada. But the garrison troops had wives and children living with them, so that even when they disbanded they stayed where they were. Old garrisons didn't die, but slowly faded away into the citizen militias who, as we've already seen, continued to protect their walled settlements once the formal Roman army in the province had ceased to exist. This is the situation that most of the anecdotes in the Life of Severinus presuppose. But because Noricum was a backwater, remote from the main action, provincial Roman life still went on there much as usual. We know from the Life that the roads were still in good repair, and that trading was maintained both with Italy and with near neighbours up and down the Danube. Roman landowners still worked their fields from their walled settlements. At the same time the new political powers dominating the north Alpine region after the collapse of the Hunnic and Roman Empires also figure

in the text: the Herules, Alamanni, Ostrogoths and, above all, because they were the province's nearest neighbours, the Rugi.

The essential problem facing the Noricans at this point was how to continue living a provincial Roman life in the absence of the Empire within whose embrace it had evolved.

We learn from the Life that the Norican communities' efforts at self-defence were far from unsuccessful – particularly, Eugippius is at pains to convey, given the assistance of Severinus' powers of prophecy and mediation. Local communities had developed effective techniques for dealing with raiders, sending out scouts to provide advance warning of attacks so that everyone could hurry back inside the walls. Even full-scale assaults such as those carried out by the Alamanni on Quintanis and Batavis could be beaten off. And where raiders took provincials prisoner, they could sometimes be rescued or ransomed.[50] More generally, while other more peripheral powers, particularly the Alamanni but also the Herules and Ostrogoths, looked on the Noricans as a source of booty and slaves, their neighbours the Rugi were interested in a more ordered relationship. Some of the Norican towns began to pay tribute to them, in return for which the Rugi left them in peace. Their kings even paid court to Severinus and always listened to his advice, or so the Life tells us, and extensive trading was carried on back and forth across the river.

With the divine assistance to which the saint had access, says Eugippius, some of the towns of Noricum were able to maintain for some time a lifestyle that preserved much of its old Romanness. The emphasis has to be added. One theme of the Life of St Severinus is a kind of London-in-the-Blitz determination to carry on being more Roman than usual. Another is more pessimistic. A sense of danger and threat is felt everywhere. If you ventured out from your settlement even at midday to pick fruit, you might be dragged off into slavery. The citizens of Tiburnia were forced to buy off Valamer's Goths by handing them just about every item of moveable wealth they possessed, including old clothes and alms collected for the poor. More brutally, whole communities were picked off one by one by rampaging barbarian outsiders, who would carry off any survivors they chose to spare. Severinus tried to warn the inhabitants of Asturis of impending disaster when he left for Comagenis, but they wouldn't listen, and this town that was the site of his first monastery was duly destroyed, except for one refugee – the individual who brought the news of the

disaster to Comagenis. Later on, sudden attacks by the Heruli destroyed Ioviacum, and the Thuringi despatched the last inhabitants of Batavis.

Most of the Batavians had already left for Lauriacum, another surviving settlement, and retrenchment of this kind is a third theme of the *Life*. Outlying sites that were too isolated and dangerous were progressively abandoned. Thus the inhabitants of Quintanis moved to Batavis, and it was together that the two groups sought sanctuary in Lauriacum. Even here, though, they were not completely safe. For the Rugi, although interested in a long-term relationship, nonetheless viewed the Noricans as a resource to be exploited. Different princes of the Rugi, not content with merely extracting tribute from them, also sought on occasion to transplant large numbers north of the Danube, where they would be more fully under their thumb. Severinus fought off these attempts, but it was a losing battle.[51]

Up to about AD 400, the military power of the Roman Empire had protected the area between the Alps and the Danube, largely excluding from it other forces based north of the river. With the disappearance of that power, the region as it had so far evolved couldn't function as a self-sustaining unit. Its population became a valuable potential resource for a series of new powers. It was impossible for Norican settlements – even the *Fliehburgen* – to preserve their independence indefinitely; established patterns of Roman provincial life were bound to erode, whether through violent abduction or less aggressive resettlement.
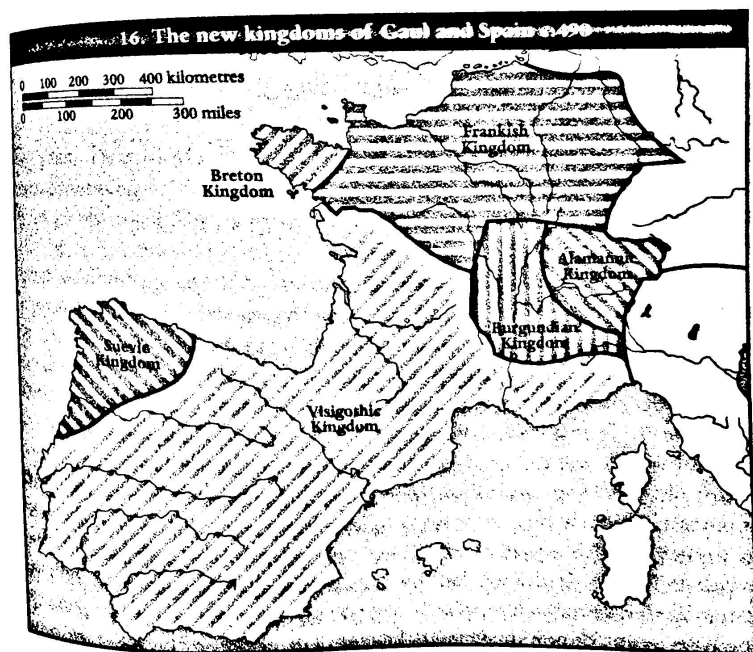
All of this took some time to unfold. St Severinus died on 5 January 482, and at that point some of the towns even on the Danube line itself still existed. Many had already fallen by the wayside, however, and the new forces, which would eventually turn the region into a thoroughly non-Roman world, were irreversibly at work. As such, Noricum provides us with a case study, a model for what happened to provincial Roman life in areas where the Roman military presence withered away through lack of funds. The provincials were far from helpless, nor did their Romanness disappear overnight. But they and the pattern of their lives depended on the continued flow of imperial power into their locality, and when that ceased, the old way of life was doomed. Noricum also gives us a plausible model for the kind of thing that went on in post-Roman Britain, therefore, where another sub-Roman population struggled to preserve itself in the absence of

imperial protection, first using immigrant Germanic warbands but then fighting against them. It didn't happen overnight, but Roman villas and towns were eventually destroyed, and the population made to serve the needs of new masters: no longer emperors in Italy but, in Noricum, the Rugi (if they avoided abduction) or, in Britain, various Anglo-Saxon kings.

Heartlands: Gaul and Spain

THE UNRAVELLING OF Empire in Noricum took a particular course, one that flowed from its role as a strategic backwater combined with its lack of a rich, well connected elite of Roman landowners to agitate for its protection by what remained of the state. As a result the Roman Empire, as far as this province was concerned, just faded away. In the old heartlands of the western Empire, Gaul and Spain, the end of the Roman imperial project was never going to be such a low-key affair. The defeat of the Byzantine armada pulled the plug on the expectations of revival aroused by the arrival of Anthemius, but the two regions were still home to rich and powerful Roman landowning families. In Italy and parts of Gaul some quite powerful imperial military formations remained, as well as the by now well established barbarian powers, particularly the Visigoths and Burgundians.[52] The fate of Gaul and Spain, therefore, could not be that of places like Noricum or Britain, where a relative power vacuum left provincials to struggle on as best they could. Gaul and Spain, by contrast, saw the intersection of, if anything, too many interested parties. A portrait of the end of Empire here must necessarily work, therefore, on the less intimate level of complicated manoeuvring at royal courts. But thanks to the surviving letter collection of Sidonius Apollinaris, it is no less vividly reflected than is the fate of Noricum in the *Life of Severinus*.

One of the first to grasp the significance of the defeat of the emperor Anthemius' North African expedition was the Visigothic king Euric. This younger brother of Theoderic II, who had thrown his weight behind the regime of the western emperor Avitus back in 454, perceived that the world had changed. Where Theoderic had been content to chart the Visigoths' future within a Roman world that seemed likely to continue and to seek power behind the imperial throne, Euric was made of different stuff. In 465 he had organized a

coup in which Theoderic was murdered and he himself took power. Immediately, he sent ambassadors to the kings of the Vandals and Suevi, looking to reverse his brother's hostile stance towards them. Theoderic had allied with the rump of Empire against these powers; now Euric aimed to ally with them against what remained of the Empire. The arrival of Anthemius with strong eastern reinforcements of the Empire stopped these plans in their tracks, Euric immediately withdrawing his ambassadors so as to avoid finding himself in direct conflict with a newly rejuvenated western authority. With the defeat of the Byzantine armada, however, it became apparent that Anthemius would not become the power that Euric had feared. The *Getica* sums up not cinctly: 'Becoming aware of the frequent changes of Roman emperor, Euric, king of the Visigoths, took the initiative to seize the Gallic provinces on his own authority.'[54] He understood that there was no longer any need to worry about the central Roman authorities. After their last defeat, they had lost all ability to intervene effectively north of the Alps. The way was open to him to pursue his own Visigothic agenda.

As soon as the dust had settled on the African fiasco, Euric set to work. In 469, he launched the first of a series of campaigns designed to carve out an independent Visigothic kingdom. In this year his forces went north, attacking the Bretons under King Riothamus, who were close allies of Anthemius. A Visigothic victory drove Riothamus into sanctuary in Burgundian territory, and gave Euric control of Tours and Bourges, thus extending his northern boundaries to the River Loire (map 16). Further advances in this direction were contained by what was left of the Roman army of the Rhine under its leader, a Count Paul, operating in conjunction with Salian Franks under their king Childeric. Gaul beyond the Loire, however, was of only peripheral interest to Euric. In 470/1, he turned his forces south-east towards the Rhône valley and Arles, the capital of Roman Gaul. There in 471 he administered the *coup de grâce* to Anthemius' dwindling hopes by defeating an Italian army led by his son Anthemiolus, who died in the fighting. But capturing walled Roman cities, it will be remembered, was not the Visigoths' forte. For instance, every summer for four years, 471-4, Visigothic would-be besiegers appeared outside the city of Clermont-Ferrand in the Auvergne without ever managing to force their way inside. It took Euric until 476, in fact, to gain possession of the region's two great prizes, Arles and Marseille – by which time he

controlled the Auvergne, ceded to him by the authorities in Italy also in an abortive bid to halt his expansion towards Arles. At the same time, more dynamic campaigns had been taking place south of the Pyrenees. In 473, Euric's forces seized Tarragona and the cities of the Hispanic Mediterranean coast, and by 476 all of the Iberian peninsula was his, except for a small Suevic enclave in the north-west. The Visigothic settlement had finally become a kingdom, stretching from the Loire in the north, to the Alps in the east, to the straits of Gibraltar in the south.[55]

The Visigoths were not the only power interested in expansion during these years. Euric's campaigns ran up against the ambitions of the Burgundian kingdom, established in the upper Rhône valley. The Burgundians too had long had their eyes on Arles. Not powerful enough to defeat the Visigoths in the race southwards, they nonetheless had some success in moving the boundaries of their kingdom in that direction. By 476 they had taken a salient of cities and other

16. The new kingdoms of Gaul and Spain c.490

territory between the Alps and the Rhône, running as far south as Avignon and Cavaillon (map 16). Further north on the Roman side, were emerging for the first time as a major power on the Franks, too, were Rhine. The full story is lost in myth and half-history, but roughly what happened is this. A Frankish world previously confined to the east of the Rhine and divided between a series of warband leaders of expanded its control west of the river and at the same time was both prompted to unite by the rise of more powerful warlords. Just as with the two Gothic supergroups unified by Alaric and Valamer, this created a force of unprecedented power, able to compete at an entirely new level and which rapidly acquired for itself new territories on former Roman soil. By the 470s, the process was far from complete, but Childeric was already prominent, and by the end of the decade, if not before, he and his Salian Franks had taken control of the old Roman province of Belgica Secunda with its capital at Tournai.[56] A whole series of powers, then, carved up between them the old imperial heartlands of Gaul and Spain. Some, like the Visigoths and Burgundians, were well established features of the strategic landscape; others, like the Franks and the Bretons, much more recent creations. South of the Loire, the lands they took were also home to powerful landowning families, used to holding high office within the Roman state. Thanks to Sidonius, who was one of them, we have an inside view of the significance of these upheavals for a select Gallo-Roman few. No source gives us access to the experiences of elite Hispano-Romans, but there is every reason to suppose that their reactions were pretty similar.

In the years between 468 and 476, some of these landowners were manoeuvring to remain part of a functioning western Empire, however much of a rump this might prove to be. This in itself is vivid testimony to how powerful the idea of Empire, despite all its recent setbacks, remained. Sidonius himself, in the time of Avitus, had been happy to work with Visigoths like Theoderic II who knew their place and saw the future in terms of a Visigothic sphere of influence within a continuing Roman world. When other Visigoths, like Euric, wanted their own entirely independent kingdom, however, Sidonius was ready to fight not to be a part of it. In the early 470s he and a group of like-minded friends, including his brother-in-law Ecdicius the son of the emperor Avitus (by birth from the Auvergne), did everything they could to keep Clermont-Ferrand Roman. For example they put money

into raising a military force to fend off the annual summer siege of their city by Visigothic forces. The fighting that ensued was pretty desultory. Clermont-Ferrand was not the centrepiece of Euric's ambition, and Ecdicius once broke through Gothic lines with just eighteen men. The determination of these landowners to remain Roman, however, was deadly serious. They aimed to make enough of a show of armed loyalty to encourage first Anthemius, then his successors, to do their utmost to maintain the Auvergne within a minimal western Empire, rather than toss it away as a prize for Visigothic or Burgundian expansion.[57]

But while Sidonius and others like him were still labouring to remain Roman, others had already decided that the western Empire had no political future and that it was time to switch allegiance to one of the new powers in the land. The case of Arvandus provides a striking example. Though Praetorian Prefect of Gaul, he wrote to Euric immediately after the African defeat:[58]

dissuading him from peace with the 'Greek Emperor' [Anthemius], insisting that the Bretons settled to the north of the Loire should be attacked, and declaring that the Gallic provinces ought according to the law of nations to be divided up with the Burgundians and a great deal more mad stuff in the same vein, fitted to rouse a warlike king to fury and a peaceful one to shame.

Arvandus, who cheerfully acknowledged authorship of this highly treasonable letter during his subsequent trial, clearly preferred the rule of Euric or the king of the Burgundians to that of Anthemius. Or perhaps, like some Gallic landowners in the 410s, he saw this kind of territorial division as the best path to peace and the maintenance of some kind of social order. Whatever his motivation, the episode demonstrates that opinion in Sidonius' circle of landowning peers was thoroughly divided. As we have seen, Sidonius took a very different view from Arvandus. But Arvandus was his friend and Sidonius did what he could to protect him when the former was indicted, even though the case had been brought to Italy by three other leading landowners who were also his friends (and one even a relative) – Tonantius Ferreolus, Praetorian Prefect of Gaul in 451; Thaumastius, Sidonius' paternal uncle; and a lawyer and high-ranking senator (illustris), Petronius of Arles. Arvandus was not, however, alone in his thinking. By 473, Euric's forces in eastern Spain were under the joint

command (along with a Goth) of a certain Vincentius, who in a previous incarnation in the 460s had been commander of the last properly Roman forces in the region. Others of both greater and lesser standing in the Roman provincial hierarchy were making the same leap. One Victorius was commander of Euric's forces in Gaul in the early 470s. And a second celebrated treason trial centred on the deputy prefect of Gaul, Seronatus, who in 475 was accused of facilitating Euric's takeover of Gallic territories, and was eventually found guilty and executed.[59]

Further east, the rise of independent Burgundian power was having similar effects. Sidonius' collection includes a letter to a certain Syagrius, who wielded considerable influence at the Burgundian court, not least through speaking Burgundian better than the Burgundians:

I am ... inexpressibly amazed that you have quickly acquired a knowledge of the German tongue with such ease ... You have no idea what amusement it gives me, and others too, when I hear that in your presence the barbarian is afraid to perpetrate a barbarism in his own language. The bent elders of the Germans are astounded at you when you translate letters, and they adopt you as umpire and arbitrator in their mutual dealings. A new Solon of the Burgundians in discussing the laws[60] ... you are loved, your company is sought, you are much visited, you delight, you are picked out, you are invited, you decide issues and are listened to.

Sidonius was praising Syagrius for making himself part of a post-Roman world dominated by alien kings: precisely what he himself was striving to avoid.[61] There may even have been a generational element in the alertness of the younger men to the fact that the end of the old regime was nigh. Amongst Sidonius' supporters in the Auvergne was a certain Eucherius who seems to have put up cash for the city's defence, at the same time as his son Calminius could be spotted from the city walls lined up with the besieging Goths. Sidonius' son Apollinaris, too, embraced the new Gothic order with enthusiasm, eventually holding high military office under Euric's son.[62] Thus after 468 Gallo-Roman landowning opinion was split down the middle even within the same family. In the meantime, Euric played his hand with skill. The waning of central Roman imperial power was allowing him to use the military strength of his Visigothic followers to establish a large territorial power.

But he had no model for governing this new domain other than that bequeathed to him by the dying Roman state.

The Visigothic kingdom that would emerge after 476 was thus thoroughly sub-Roman in character. It continued to operate, like its Roman predecessor, by means of an infrastructure of cities, provinces and governors. It had written law (very often a continuation of existing Roman regulations), and levied taxation on agricultural produce – a practice only possible given that the existing Roman social order of landowners and peasantry survived. Landowners needed to stay in business to extract the peasants' surplus, keeping part of it for themselves as rent while passing on the rest to the state as revenue. The operation of Roman law, together with the operation of the tax system, required the expertise of Roman functionaries to keep it going.

While he could use Visigothic arms to carve out a kingdom, then, Euric needed Romans to run it for him. The more members of the Roman aristocratic and administrative classes he could attract to his colours, the easier it would be to turn his conquests into a functioning kingdom. So he most graciously accepted all offers of service from Roman aristocrats, letting them praise him in iambic pentameters if they so chose. Euric was happy to perpetuate this practice begun in the reign of Theoderic, and showed the degree of respect for Roman cultural forms that was required to keep the flow of personnel coming. And he had his own Syagrius, a poet and lawyer from Narbonne called Leo, described by Sidonius in 476/7 as Euric's letter- and speech-writer:

Through [Leo] the famous king himself [Euric] terrifies the hearts of nations far across the sea, or from his commanding eminence makes, after his victory, a complicated treaty with the barbarians trembling on the banks of the Waal, or having restrained people by arms now restrains arms by laws through the whole extent of his enlarged domains.

Having a deep need of them, Euric was willing to promote any Romans who would offer him service.[63]

He had, in fact, a mighty gift to offer in return. The disappearance of the Roman state put the Roman landowning class's position in doubt, since along with the state disappeared the legal system that had secured it against all comers. And although this privileged class survived, for instance, in the Visigothic and Burgundian kingdoms, it was not always the case elsewhere. Political revolution is often

accompanied by social revolution, as it was in other parts of the Roman west. In post-Roman Britain, for instance, the old Roman landowning class disappeared completely. Even if they merely allowed their resident Roman landowners to continue living as before, therefore, new states such as the Burgundian and Gothic kingdoms were doing them a huge favour.

Historians have sometimes been taken aback by the seeming readiness of this class to throw off their allegiance to the Empire and renegotiate a fallback position with the nearest barbarian power, and significance. This, it has been argued, shows a fundamental lack of loyalty to the Roman state – an observation which then becomes part of a narrative of imperial collapse. Roman Europe disappeared, it is argued, because its elites didn't want to maintain it. In my view, such thoughts fail to do justice to the particularities of this group of people whose position was based almost exclusively on the ownership of land. Landed wealth is by definition immoveable. Unless you belonged to the super-rich of the Roman world, owning lands far to the east as well as in Gaul or Spain, then when the Roman state started to fail, you were left with little choice. You either had to mend fences with your nearest incoming barbarian king so as to secure the continuation of your property rights, or give up the elite status into which you had been born. If, as the Empire collapsed around them, Roman landown-ers perceived the slightest chance of holding on to their lands, they were bound to take it.

In his dealings with the provincial aristocracies of southern Gaul and Spain, then, Euric held the trump card. All he needed to do was steadily expand the area under his control – a relatively easy matter since the decline of its tax revenues meant that the Roman state could put few soldiers in the field – and the landowners would come running. Some required little prompting, others more persuasion, but most eventually came round. Even Sidonius himself crossed this Rubicon. Having led the resistance to Gothic expansion in Clermont-Ferrand, he could hardly expect Euric to smile upon him when the city finally fell into Gothic hands in 474/5. He was duly carted off to exile, first to a castle near Carcassonne, then to Bordeaux. There he tried to continue his literary studies, but 'my drooping eyelids scarcely got a wink of sleep; for a din would immediately arise from the two old Gothic women near the skylight of my bedroom, the most quarrelsome, drunken, vomiting creatures the world will ever see.' *Biberunt ut Gothi*

'drinking like Goths' – would be a proverbial expression in Italy by the sixth century. The letter from which this passage comes was written to Leo of Narbonne, poet, lawyer and Euric's chief adviser, accompanying a copy of a text called *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, which Leo had requested from Sidonius. Here, in fact, lay Sidonius' path to redemption. Euric was so busy that he could only see Sidonius briefly, at Bordeaux, twice in three months, but Sidonius had friends at court: Leo, and another literary acquaintance called Lampridius. By their intercession, he got off lightly in the end. His estates in Clermont, which could easily have been forfeit, were returned to him. He wrote an ingratiating little poem in return:

Our lord and master [Euric], even he, has but little time to spare while a conquered world makes suit to him. Here in Bordeaux, we see the blue-eyed Saxon . . . Here your old Sygambrian,[64] who had shorn the back of your head after defeat . . . Here wanders the Herulian with his blue-grey eyes . . . Here the Burgundian seven-foot high oft begs for peace on bended knee . . . From this source the Roman seeks salvation, and against the hordes of the Scythian clime . . . it is your bands, Euric, that are called for.

Sidonius sent this first to Lampridius, hoping that he would show it to the king. He did. Euric, the beneficiary of so many conquests, accepted this literary flag of surrender and could afford to be generous.[65] Whether he let all his former opponents off so lightly is perhaps unlikely. And certainly in less successful kingdoms, where there were fewer resources to go round, Roman landowners found themselves having to accept harsher terms from their new masters than those meted out to Sidonius.

Compared with the Visigoths, for instance, the Burgundians man-aged to expand their domain only modestly between 468 and 476. Like Euric, the Burgundian monarchy needed to attract Roman supporters, but had its own armed men to reward as well; and all this from a much more restricted resource base. The result was a compromise, which we find reflected in one of the law-books of the new Burgundian kingdom, the *Book of Constitutions*:

It was commanded at the time the order was issued whereby our people [the Burgundians] should receive one-third of the slaves, and two-thirds of the land, that whoever had received land

together with slaves either by the gift of our predecessors or of ourselves, should not require a third of the slaves nor two parts of the land from that place in which hospitality had been assigned him.[66]

There is much more that we would like to know, but the arrangement alluded to here gives us an insight into how Burgundian kings set about resolving the political balancing act that their situation required. About twenty years ago, the historian Walter Goffart argued that what was being referred to here was a division of the tax revenues from the Roman city territories (*civitates*) that had fallen into Burgundian hands, rather than actual real estate. This is a very forced reading and, as many have argued since, there is no doubt that what we're talking about here is the division of actual estates, parts of which were to be handed over to the Burgundian freemen.[67]

Within the Burgundian kingdom, then, occurred a root-and-branch recycling of landed assets. And as the law makes clear, it was again a process rather than an event. The order that they receive two-thirds of the estates and one-third of the tenants applied only to those Burgundians who had not already been granted land or slaves. We're also not told whether every Roman landowner was affected, or whether this was a matter in which the king exercised discretion. But the price of keeping some of your land was, on the face of it, relatively high for Roman estate owners. On the other hand, there is a singular lack of any mention of taxation in subsequent Burgundian legislation, which may also be significant. The total deal was perhaps that, in return for handing over two-thirds of your land, you not only got to keep the other third, but were also exempted from paying tax on it.[68] If so, the situation was not so harsh as it might at first seem. From the 470s, as the legal evidence makes clear, Euric and his son and successor, Alaric II, were also paying off their supporters in the Visigothic kingdom with grants of estates.[69] But that kingdom was much larger, and may not have required so much to be expropriated from its Roman landowners.

Either way, the final unravelling of the western Empire in its old heartlands of southern Gaul and Spain saw a great carve-up of the available assets. The interested military powers flexed their muscles, mounting the campaigns from which the new territorial boundaries emerged. The Visigoths came away with a huge kingdom, the Burgundians with just south-east Gaul. Further north, the situation remained

in flux. In the north-east, the Salian Franks were the coming power, and in the north-west a Breton kingdom of some size was emerging. At the same time, the leadership of what remained of the Roman army of the Rhine seems to have established, for the moment at least, a power-base to the east of Paris. The defeat of Basiliscus' armada in 468 prompted Euric's wars of conquest, the campaigns of the Franks and Burgundians, and a consequent revolution in landownership. The overall result was a redrawing of mental as well as physical maps. Former barbarian settlements had become kingdoms, Roman landowners had been forced to make life-changing choices, and the central Roman state was in its last throes.

The Imperial Centre

WHILE WHAT REMAINED of the heartlands and outer reaches of the Empire in 468 was being annexed or just fading away, in the imperial centre – both in Italy and Constantinople – confusion and indecision reigned. In Italy, in the aftermath of the Byzantine armada's failure, Anthemius and Ricimer were evenly matched in their jostling for pre-eminence. Ricimer's acceptance of Anthemius' arrival on the scene had certainly reduced his own power. But hopes that the assistance Anthemius was bringing in from the east would kick-start the rebuilding of the west had come to nothing. Anthemius now had little to offer, serving merely as an obstacle to Ricimer's ambitions. A quarrel broke out between them in 470. Ricimer went as far as gathering an army of six thousand men and threatening war, but the two were reconciled early in 471. Then the defeat and death of Anthemiolus, the emperor's son, followed later that year by the loss of all the troops that Anthemius had sent with him against the Visigoths in Gaul, cut away the regime's last military prop, and Ricimer pounced. Anthemius holed up in Rome, and Ricimer besieged him there for several months before the city fell. The emperor was cornered and killed by Ricimer's nephew, the Burgundian prince Gundobad, on 11 July 472.

Olybrius, brother-in-law of the heir apparent to the Vandal kingdom, Huneric, had long been pushed by Geiseric as a candidate for the western throne. He was sent to Italy from Constantinople in 472 by the emperor Leo to act as mediator between Ricimer and Anthemius, but became instead Ricimer's next candidate for the purple. Having

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been made western emperor in April 472 (before the death of the present incumbent Anthemius), he died on 2 November of the same year, a short while after Ricimer himself, on 18 August. This left Gundobad as kingmaker-in-chief, and his choice fell upon a high-ranking guards officer, Glycerius, the Count of the Domestics (comes domesticorum). He was proclaimed emperor on 3 March 473. It was while all this fiddling was going on in Rome that the Visigoths, Burgundians and Vandals were busy expanding their realms. All that Glycerius ruled, therefore, as emperor of the west, was Italy and a tiny island of territory north of the Alps in south-eastern Gaul. The struggle for what was notionally the imperial throne had become a murderous competition for next to nothing. That, at least, seems to have been Gundobad's conclusion. Having briefly adopted his uncle's role as kingmaker, on the death of his father Gundioc king of the Burgundians in late 473 or early 474, he returned home. He must have decided that the struggle for power in Italy was a much less attractive proposition than claiming his share of the Burgundian kingdom alongside his brothers Chilperic, Godigisel and Godomar. What better measure of the erosion of the western Empire?

Gundobad's departure created a power vacuum into which stepped Julius Nepos, nephew and successor of Count Marcellinus, the ruler of Dalmatia since the 450s. After the murder of his uncle in Sicily in 468, Julius inherited Dalmatia and what remained of the Illyrian field army. With the eastern Empire's blessing but no actual assistance, he landed his forces at Portus, at the mouth of the Tibur just outside Rome, in early summer 474. Having overthrown Glycerius without a fight, he proclaimed himself western emperor on 19 or 24 June 474. But Nepos never reconciled the commanders of the army of Italy to his rule, which, as a result, lasted only just over a year. And it was one of his own appointees, the general Orestes, whom we met in Chapter 7 in the unlikely guise of ambassador of Attila the Hun, who eventually drove him out. Nepos' aim in appointing Orestes had been to clear up the mess in Italy, but Orestes turned his forces on Nepos instead. On 28 August 475, Nepos left Ravenna and sailed back to Dalmatia, abandoning the Roman west.[70]

WHILE ALL THIS was going on in Italy, the emperor Leo in Constantinople, rendered impotent by the fiasco of the 468 expedition, looked on with increasing despair. On his return to the east, the armada's

commander Basiliscus fled for sanctuary to the Church of Hagia Sophia (not the current one, but its predecessor burned down in the Nika riot of 532), and refused to come out until Leo announced publicly that he was forgiven. The authorities in Constantinople had to decide what to do next. They did their best to stabilize the situation in Italy, wanting it to be ruled – naturally enough – by an ally. Although it should have been plain from the moment of the armada's defeat that the western Empire was doomed, it was only after the death of Anthemius that it became inescapably obvious in Constantinople that there was no further room for manoeuvre. Since they couldn't be defeated, and were already encroaching on the eastern Mediterranean, the Vandals needed to be conciliated. So negotiations began. The result was a treaty concluded between the emperor Leo and the Vandals in 474. Who could now doubt that Constantinople had given up all hope of reviving the Roman west?[71]

Fittingly, it was the army of Italy that was the last to give up on the idea of Empire. Having driven out Nepos, Orestes put his own son Romulus on the throne. Orestes had travelled twice on Hunnic missions to Constantinople. His father Tatulus and father-in-law Romulus were at this time, during the later 440s, close confidants of the Roman commander Aetius, and part of the embassy that arrived at Attila's court when Priscus was there. After the collapse of the Hunnic Empire, Orestes had found his way back to Italy, and rose through the imperial ranks until appointed to senior military command by Julius Nepos. Bearer of the same name as Rome's founder, Orestes' son Romulus was made emperor on 31 October 475, but Orestes and his brother Paul were the real éminences grises. No doubt whichever panegyrist it was who spoke at the coronation declared it the start of a new golden age ushered in by a second Romulus. Reality proved somewhat different, and Romulus, this last western emperor, has gone down in history as Augustulus – 'little Augustus'.

By this stage, no one could have thought that the ongoing struggle for power within Italy was likely to lead to the control of any assets outside the peninsula. With the rest of the west in the hands of other powers, and the remaining army of Italy more or less impotent, what further complications could there be?

As the Hunnic Empire collapsed in the mid-460s, many refugees of Germanic origin, particularly the Sciri but also the Rugi and others, had moved on to Italy and been recruited as allied soldiery by Ricimer.

During the first half of the 470s they had made themselves useful to the Italian military establishment, and their leader Odovacar, of the old Scirian royal family, had become an important voice in Italian politics. He'd played a key role in the civil war between Ricimer and Anthemius, and had become Count of the Domestics (*comes domesticorum*) under Nepos, evidently receiving from him the rank of Patrician.[72] On his way to Italy he had stopped off in Noricum to see Severinus: he was informed by the holy man that he would become famous.

When he took his leave, Severinus again said to him: 'Go to Italy, go, now covered with mean hides; soon you will make rich gifts to many'[73]

By the early 470s, as we have seen, the Roman state's main problem was lack of money. Even into the 460s, the army of Italy had remained the single largest military formation in western Europe – considerably larger, I suspect, than the tax revenues of Italy alone could support. And, as pay started to dry up, the troops began to get restive, especially the Sciri. Odovacar had enough imagination and intelligence to grasp the point: with the army becoming increasingly difficult to manage, trying to set up yet another short-lived regime was a waste of time. In August 476 he had gathered enough support to act. He captured and killed first Orestes, near Placentia on 28 August, then his brother Paul in Ravenna, on 4 September. Now in control of the immediate situation, Procopius tells us, Odovacar set about addressing the underlying problem. Since there was no prospect of pay increases, another form of reward had to be found. Accordingly, Odovacar set about distributing to the soldiers some of the landed estates of Italy: 'By giving the third part of the land to the barbarians, and in this way gaining their allegiance most firmly, [Odovacar] held the supreme power securely.'[74] As so often, we know much less about what happened than we would like to. The distribution was organized by a Roman senator by the name of Liberius, but clearly not the whole of Italy was involved. The armed forces needed to be retained in the strategically important areas of the peninsula, particularly the north, to guard the Alpine passes, and probably also the Adriatic coast, since Nepos was still at large in Dalmatia.[75] Whether Odovacar needed, as had happened in Burgundy, to dispossess the Roman landowners of part of their estates, or whether sufficient land could be found by

reallocating long-term leases on public ones, as Aetius had done for those senators driven out of Proconsularis by Geiseric (see Chapter 6), is also unclear. Certainly, unlike in the Burgundian kingdom, taxation remained a living feature of government in post-Roman Italy, so Odovacar, like Euric, perhaps had more freedom of manoeuvre and didn't need to resort to large-scale private confiscation. Either way, he found enough landed resources to satisfy the expectations of his men. The path to a secure hold on power in these changed times.

By early autumn 476, most loose ends had been tied up. The changes brought on by Odovacar's regime were pushing Italy towards a new political stability, even if no land distributions had yet taken place. One anomaly remained. At the moment, Italy still had an emperor in Romulus Augustulus, but Odovacar had no interest in preserving the position of this notional ruler who controlled nothing beyond the Italian peninsula. Consulting friends in the Senate, he came up with the solution. A senatorial embassy was sent to Constantinople, now presided over by Leo's successor the emperor Zeno,

> proposing that there was no need of a divided rule and that one, shared Emperor was sufficient for both territories. They said, moreover, that they had chosen Odovacar, a man of military and political experience, to safeguard their own affairs, and that Zeno should confer upon him the rank of Patrician and entrust him with the government of Italy.[76]

In the kind of language that accompanied the outbreak of the Falklands war in the 1980s, Zeno was to have sovereignty over Italy as Roman emperor, but Odovacar would control the administration. In practice, this meant merely that by promoting him to the rank of Patrician Zeno should legitimize Odovacar's seizure of power; it was the title that the effective rulers of Italy such as Stilicho and Aetius had been holding now for the best part of a century. Zeno hesitated for a moment – an embassy from Nepos had just arrived asking for his assistance in reclaiming the throne. Here was Zeno's chance to put the power of the east behind a last attempt to restore the western Empire. He weighed up the situation carefully, then wrote a sympathetic note to Nepos. The conclusion he had come to was what everyone else already knew. The western Empire was over. His letter to Odovacar expressed the pious hope that he would take Nepos back, but, more significantly, addressed him as Patrician, saying that he would have

appointed him to this dignity but didn't need to since he had already received it under Nepos. The reply seemed ambiguous, but wasn't. The truth was that Zeno wasn't prepared to move a muscle on Nepos' behalf – he was writing to Odovacar formally, as ruler of Italy.

Odovacar took the hint. He deposed Romulus, pensioning him off with a charity rare in imperial politics to an estate in Campania. He then sent the western imperial vestments, including, of course, the diadem and cloak which only an emperor could wear, back to Constantinople. This momentous act brought half a millennium of empire to a close.

10

THE FALL OF ROME

IN 476 THE EASTERN Roman Empire survived the collapse of its western counterpart, and it continued to thrive, to all appearances, throughout the next century. Under the emperor Justinian I (527–65), it even mounted an expansionary programme of conquest in the western Mediterranean that destroyed the Vandal and Ostrogothic kingdoms of North Africa and Italy and captured part of southern Spain from the Visigoths. Gibbon concluded that the Roman Empire survived in the eastern Mediterranean for virtually a millennium, dating its fall to the Ottoman capture of Constantinople in 1453. To my mind, however, the rise of Islam in the seventh century caused a decisive break in east Mediterranean Romanness. It robbed Justinian's state of three-quarters of its revenues and prompted institutional and cultural restructuring on a massive scale. Even though the rulers of Constantinople continued to call themselves 'Emperors of the Romans' long after the year 700, they were actually ruling an entity best understood as another successor state rather than a proper continuation of the Roman Empire.[1] But even by my reckoning, a fully Roman state survived in the eastern Mediterranean for more than a century and a half after the deposition of Romulus Augustulus.

During the same period there were many living in western Europe and North Africa who continued to think of themselves, and were thought of by others, as Romans. In the 510s and 520s, Romans (Romani) were still referred to as a specific group in the official documents, not least the law codes, of the Visigothic, Ostrogothic, Burgundian and Frankish kingdoms. There have been attempts in recent years to argue that the designation lacked real meaning, but setting up independent kingdoms on former Roman soil involved substantial landed pay-offs to the non-Roman military followers of the new kings. This process turned these followers into a highly privileged group within the new kingdoms, giving new meaning to distinctions between these newcomers and less privileged Roman landowners.

Over time, the distinctions were eroded, but it took several generations.[2] After 476, then, we have 'proper' Romans still in both east and west, so what was it exactly that fell?

The Destruction of Central Romanness

WHAT DID COME TO an end in 476 was any attempt to maintain the western Roman Empire as an overarching, supra-regional political structure. We have already discussed the important distinction between 'Roman' as applied to the central state, and 'Roman' as applied to the characteristic patterns of provincial life lived within it. The Roman state had consisted, at its simplest, of a decision-making centre – emperor, court and bureaucracy – tax-raising mechanisms, and a professional army whose military power defined and defended the area of its dominion. Equally important were the centrally generated legal structures that had defined and protected provincial Roman landowners. Within the social circle of these landowners operated most of the cultural norms that made Romanness a distinctive phenomenon, and their participation in the upper echelons of the bureaucracy, the court and to some extent the army bound together the imperial centre and its many local communities. After 476, all this came to an end. While substantial numbers of the old Roman landowning class still survived in the west with their distinctive culture more or less intact, the key centralizing structures of Empire had gone. No single law-giving authority was recognized, no centrally controlled tax structures empowered a centrally controlled professional army, and political participation in bureaucracies, armies and courts had all fragmented. Surviving Roman landowners were busy advancing their interests at the royal courts of the successor kingdoms, rather than looking towards the central structures of one Empire. Provincial Romanness survived in parts of the west after 476, but central Romanness was a thing of the past.

The disappearance of the central structures of Empire was not felt everywhere at exactly the same time. At one extreme, central Romanness disappeared, never to return, from the British provinces as early as 410, though a degree of provincial Romanness survived there for perhaps another generation, until the 440s. The North African provinces of Proconsularis, Byzacena and Numidia fell out of the system,

likewise, with the Vandal conquest of Carthage in 439. For most of the Roman west, however, the end was actually pretty quick. On the emperor Anthemius' arrival from Constantinople in 467, Italy, much of Gaul, a substantial part of Spain, Dalmatia and Noricum still owed political allegiance to the Italian centre. Some areas were more heedful of Italy than others, but Anthemius was taken seriously over a fair stretch of the old western Empire that had been much the same a hundred years earlier in the time of Valentinian I. Eight years later, the bonds had dissolved and the western Empire fragmented into a constellation of independent states. While I wouldn't want to play the old game of singling out a single date for unique significance, it is important to recognize the extraordinary rush of events that saw the Empire go from somewhere to nowhere in under a decade. There really was a historically significant process, in other words, that culminated in the deposition of the last Roman emperor of the west in September 476.

More than that, it is the fundamental thesis of this book that there is a coherence to the process of western imperial disintegration that unites this final collapse with the earlier losses of territory. This coherence stems from the intersection of three lines of argument.

First, the invasions of 376 and 405–8 were not random events, but two moments of crisis generated by the same strategic revolution: the rise of Hunnic power in central and eastern Europe. It is entirely uncontentious to state that the arrival of the Tervingi and Greuthungi on the banks of the Danube in the summer of 376 was caused by the Huns. That they were also responsible for a second cluster of invasions about a generation later – Radagaisus' attack on Italy in 405/6, the Rhine crossing of the Vandals, Alans and Suevi at the end of 406, and the westward advance of the Burgundians shortly after – has sometimes been asserted, but never won consensus. The fuller picture of the intrusion into Europe of Hunnic power depicted in Chapter 5 makes a powerful case for it. In 376, the Huns did not, as has usually been assumed, sweep in vast numbers as far west as the Danube frontier. For the next decade, it was Goths – not Huns – who were still providing the Romans' main opposition in this theatre; and as late as 395 most Huns was still located much closer to the Caucasus.[3] By about 420 at the latest, however, and perhaps the best part of a decade earlier, they had established themselves en masse at the heart of central Europe on the Great Hungarian Plain. No written source explicitly

says that the Huns were making this move in 405–8 and that the second wave of invasions. The fact, however, that they caused near the Caucasus in 395 and that they would somehow have to shift 1,500 kilometres further west by 420 makes it overwhelmingly likely that the 'blame' for 405–8 should be placed upon a second stage of Hunnic displacement. The growth of Hunnic power thus provides a unifying explanation for thirty-five years of periodic invasion along Rome's European frontiers.

Second, while some sixty-five years separate the deposition of Romulus Augustulus from the latest of these invasions, the two phenomena are causally connected. The various crises faced by the western Empire in the intervening years represented no more than the slow working-out of the political consequences of the earlier invasions. Damage inflicted upon west Roman provinces by protracted warfare with the invaders, combined with permanent losses of territory, generated massive losses of revenue for the central state, as we have seen. The Visigoths caused such damage to the areas around Rome between 408 and 410, for instance, that nearly a decade later these provinces were still contributing to state coffers only a seventh of their normal taxes. The Vandals, Alans and Suevi, likewise, cut a swathe of destruction through Gaul for five years after 406, before removing most of Spain from central imperial control for the best part of two decades. Worst of all, the Vandals and Alans then shifted their operations to North Africa, seizing the richest provinces of the Roman west in 439. Every temporary, as well as permanent, loss of territory brought a decline in imperial revenues, the lifeblood of the state, and reduced the western Empire's capacity to maintain its armed forces. From the *Notitia Dignitatum* we see that, already by 420, Flavius Constantius was making up for the field army losses incurred during the heavy fighting of the previous fifteen years by upgrading garrison troops, not by new recruitment. The loss of North African revenues threw the regime of Aetius further into crisis, generating a series of panic measures to try to keep the western army and Empire afloat.[6]

As the Roman state lost power, and was perceived to be doing so, provincial Roman landowning elites, at different times in different places, faced an uncomfortable new reality. The sapping of the state's vitality threatened everything that made them what they were. Defined by the land they stood on, even the dimmest, or most loyal, could not help but realize eventually that their interests would be best served by

making an accommodation with the new dominant force in their locality. Given that the Empire had existed for four hundred and fifty years, and that the east continued to prop up the west, it is not surprising that such processes of erosion took time to work themselves out. Many in the old imperial heartlands, such as the Gallic supporters of Athaulf in the 410s or Sidonius in the 450s, quickly came to terms with Goths or Burgundians as autonomous elements within a central Roman state that still enjoyed a military power and political influence. But it took two or three generations for all to accept that this was only an intermediate position, and that the trajectory of the Roman west was set inescapably towards fully independent Gothic and Burgundian kingdoms.

The third line of argument concerns the paradoxical role played by the Huns in these revolutionary events. In the 440s, the era of Attila, the Hunnic armies surged across Europe from the Iron Gates of the Danube towards Constantinople, Paris and Rome itself. These exploits earned Attila undying fame, but his decade of glory was no more than a sideshow in the drama of western imperial collapse. Of much greater significance had been the Huns' indirect impact upon the Roman Empire in previous generations, when the insecurity they generated in central and eastern Europe forced various barbarian peoples across the Roman frontier. And while Attila inflicted huge individual defeats upon imperial armies, he never threatened the permanent alienation of a significant chunk of the western Empire's taxpayers. The groups who had fled across the frontier in the crises of 376–8 and 405–8, on the other hand, did precisely that. In the generation before Attila, the Huns had even sustained the western Empire by restricting further immigration into its territories after 410 and helping Aetius, particularly, to constrain the worst expansionary excesses of the Germanic groups already forced over the frontier. The Huns' second-greatest contribution to imperial collapse, in fact, was their sudden disappearing act after Attila's death in 453. This was the straw that broke the western Empire's back. Bereft of Hunnic military assistance, it had no choice but to build regimes that would include at least some of the immigrant powers. This started a bidding war in which the last of the west's disposable assets were expended in a futile effort to bring enough powerful supporters together to generate stability. But by the late 460s, the more ambitious leaders of these outside groups, particularly Euric, king of the Visigoths, could see that what purported to be the central

western authority now controlled too little to prevent him from establishing an independent kingdom. It was this realization that led to the rapid unravelling of the last strands of Empire between 468 and 476.

In all this, it was armed outsiders warring on Roman territory who played the starring role. In successive stages, the different groups first forced their way across the frontier, then extracted treaties; then, in the end, detached so much territory from the Empire's control that its revenues dried up. Some of the first Goths of 376 were allowed across the Danube by agreement with the emperor Valens, but only because his army was already committed to battle on the Persian front. Otherwise, every stage of the process involved violence, even if it was followed by some kind of diplomatic agreement. But these agreements were no more than a recognition of the latest gains made by warfare, not the kind of diplomacy that moved events forward. I take an entirely different view, therefore, from one writer on fifth-century events who has commented: 'What we call the fall of the Roman Empire was an imaginative experiment that got a little out of hand.' You can only argue this, it seems to me, if you don't let narrative history dirty your hands. Any attempt to reconstruct fifth-century events brings home just how violent the process was. In my view, it is impossible to escape the fact that the western Empire broke up because too many outside groups established themselves on its territories and expanded their holdings by warfare.

The process that brought down the western Empire was quite different, for instance, from the one that brought down the next major European empire, the Carolingian, in the late ninth century. Here the imperial centre, even after the great conquests of Charlemagne (768–813), controlled insufficient resources to maintain itself for more than two or three generations. In particular, it never developed the redistributive taxation powers that had kept the Roman state afloat for five centuries. The need to buy local political support, something it shared with its Roman predecessor, thus quickly bankrupted the Carolingian state. Within about a century of its creation, its local elites moved pretty quickly towards autonomy, sometimes without even having to assert themselves with any vehemence. In this the Carolingian collapse does slightly resemble the final unravelling of the west after the defeat of the Vandal expedition of 468. But, overall, the process was very different: no massive intrusions by outsiders; and

the new rulers of the Carolingian successor states were mostly its indigenous nobility, not the leaders of intrusive military powers. In essence, the Carolingian state dissolved into bankruptcy because it controlled few assets to begin with, not because, as with the western Empire, outsiders stripped it of a centuries-old tax base.[6]

Local Romanness

WHILE CENTRAL Romanness was being destroyed, provincial Romanness met a variety of fates. As we have seen, the worst-case scenario – from a Roman perspective – unfolded to the north, in the British Isles. Here, it is impossible to offer any kind of connected narrative, but when history begins again about AD 600,[7] the Latin-speaking Christian Romanized landowning class, still dominant in central and southern Britain in about the year 400, had vanished. Along with it had gone the villas typical of its lifestyle, while economic production had both diminished in scale and regressed towards simplicity. Population had declined substantially, coins ceased to be used for exchange, towns no longer functioned as higher-order settlements, and most goods were produced at home rather than commercially. Late Roman pottery in Britain, for instance, was supplied by potters who distributed their wares over a radius of about forty kilometres from several centres of production such as Oxford and Ipswich. Soon after 400, pottery was being made for immediate consumption only. The old imperial provinces of Britain were likewise divided up into small kingdoms, at first maybe twenty or more, whose boundaries for the most part owed nothing to the political geography of Roman Britain. How this all came about is a matter of debate. The Victorians imagined Anglo-Saxon invaders chasing the entire Celtic sub-Romano-British population westwards into Wales and Cornwall, and across the sea into Brittany. More recent accounts have posited large numbers of indigenous British turning themselves into Anglo-Saxons in the same way that they had earlier become Romans. However you see it, characteristic Roman mores and lifestyles quickly disappeared from southern Britain after its ties with the rest of the Roman world were severed.[8]

British cataclysm was not typical, however. Parts of north-eastern Gaul aside, where the archaeological picture looks similar to that of southern Britain, the established forms of provincial life did not

disappear so suddenly or so completely, South of the Loire in the
whatever their initial misgivings, local Roman landowners reached
a variety of accommodations with their new rulers. As we saw in
Chapter 9, there was a price to be paid. Depending upon a variety of
factors, not least the availability of assets within the new kingdom,
they had to give up more or less of their land. The smallish kingdoms
kingdom seems to have enforced more large-scale confiscations than its
better-endowed Visigothic peer, but sweetened the pill, perhaps, with
tax reductions. But Roman landowners had much to offer the new
barbarian rulers and, as a result, their regimes were willing broadly to
uphold the unequal distribution of property that had brought the
landowners into existence in the first place. We see remarkably little
in terms of social upheaval, then, south of the Loire. Sidonius and his
friends experienced difficult times, but emerged with enough of their
property intact to retain their social positions. In Spain and Italy, too,
the Roman landowning class generally survived the first shock of the
end of Empire. Although in Vandal Africa Geiseric's seizure of Car-
thage was followed by large-scale property confiscations in Proconsu-
laris, Roman landowners in the other two provinces that had fallen to
him in 439 – Byzacena and Numidia – were left alone, and as other
territories were added to the Vandal Empire, confiscation was not
repeated.

In many places, then, local Romanness survived pretty well.
Catholic Christianity, a Latin-literate laity, villas, towns and more
complex forms of economic production and exchange all endured to
some extent – except in Britain – on the back of the landowning class.
Consequently, across most of the old Roman west, the destruction
of the forms and structures of the state coexisted with a survival of
Roman provincial life.'

Even under the southern Gallic model, however, local life in the
post-Roman west did not just stay 'Roman'. The full story of what
happened in these provinces after the fall of Rome is the subject of
another book, but to bring the fall of the western Empire fully into
perspective, it is important to make one major point. One of the many
arguments surrounding the end of the Empire has focused on what
significance to ascribe to the political changes that unfolded in the
course of the fifth century. Was the end of the Roman state a major
event in the history of western Eurasia, or merely a surface distur-
bance, much less important than deeper phenomena such as the rise

of Christianity, which worked themselves out essentially unaffected by
the processes of imperial collapse? Traditional historiography had no
doubt that the year 476 marked, in western Europe at least, the divide
between ancient and medieval history. More recently, the value-laden
certainty that the end of the Roman Empire marked the start of a
deep decline has given way to more nuanced views, which bear a
closer relationship to historical reality. As we have seen, there was no
sudden, total change, and this fact has laid a new emphasis on the
notion of continuity, on the idea that the best way of understanding
historical development in the late and post-Roman periods is to
consider it in terms of organic evolution rather than cataclysm.[16]

I have no doubt that these new historiographical emphases are
entirely necessary reactions to old historical orthodoxies, and I have
no truck with the idea (originating with the Romans themselves of
course) that the Roman Empire represented a higher order of society
after whose demise the only possible way to go was downwards. But
taking a minimalist view of the historical importance of the disappear-
ance of the western Roman state is also, in my view, mistaken. It was
certainly a ramshackle edifice. Running such a huge area on the basis
of primitive communications and bureaucracy, it could hardly have
been otherwise. Corruption was endemic, law enforcement sporadic,
and much power retained in the localities. Nonetheless, because it was
a long-established one-party state it managed to change the rules by
which local life was conducted in some very profound ways. This
manifests itself above all in the various processes that – slightly
misleadingly – attract the label 'Romanization'. To participate in the
benefits of Empire, provincial elites needed to gain Roman citizenship.
The easiest way to do this was to set up your own town with Latin
rights, and hold high office within it. A rush towards this kind of
urbanization, therefore, followed the establishment of Roman domi-
nance. You also needed to be able to speak 'proper' Latin, so that
Latin literary education spread too, and to show that you had bought
into the values of classical civilization. Public buildings in which
such a civilized life might be lived with one's peers (meeting houses,
baths and so on) and the villa style of domestic architecture were
the concrete manifestations of that Roman vision. At the same time,
the Pax Romana brought a massive peace dividend in its wake, creat-
ing regional interconnections that provided many new economic
opportunities.

Most of what has been called Romanization was not a state-directed top-down activity. Rather, it was the outcome of the individual responses of conquered elites to the brute fact of Empire, as they adapted their society to the new conditions that Roman domination imposed upon them. An essential part of the deal, however, was that while they transformed their lifestyles so as to participate in what the state had to offer, the Empire's armies protected them. Local Roman-ness was thus inseparable from the existence of Empire.

The symbiotic nature of this relationship shows up clearly. As we have seen, much of the burden resulting from the need of the third-century Roman state to extract a much higher level of tax from its provinces fell on the old town councils. It was largely in these councils that old forms of local Roman political life had been played out. You spent money to win office, making the friends and influencing the people whose support would in due course ensure that you rose to dominance and to the control of local funds. At a stroke, the confisca-tion of these revenues removed the whole point of the endeavour, and provincial elites weren't slow to notice: hence the almost immediate disappearance in the mid-third century of inscriptions recording the expensive acts of generosity by which people had previously gained advancement. By the fourth century, careers on town councils had been abandoned in favour of the imperial bureaucracy, which became the new path to local dominance. When the centre made changes to its modus operandi, then local Romanness would change in response - often, especially in the long term, in ways not anticipated

Too much of life in the provinces was dependent upon the political and cultural order of the state for its passing to go unnoticed. Take education, for instance. The literary education characteristic of late Roman elites - Latin in the west, Greek in the east - was not cheaply bought. It required the best part of a decade's intensive instruction with the grammarian, and only the landowning class could afford to invest so much in their children's education. As we noted earlier, they did so because speaking classical Latin (or Greek) instantly marked one out as 'civilized'. It was also necessary for most forms of advancement. The vast majority of the state's new bureaucrats came from the old town-council, or curial, classes, for whom a classical education con-tinued to be de rigueur.[11]

In the post-Roman west, however, elite career patterns began to change. The new set-up saw military service for one's king, rather

than a foot on the bureaucratic ladder, as the main path to advance-ment for most secular elites, even in areas where Roman landowners survived 476 and a southern Gallic model prevailed. As a result, an expensive literary education ceased to be a necessity. The descendants of both Roman and immigrant elites in fact continued to revere the old traditions. The odd Frankish and Visigothic king has gone down in the cultural annals for his Latin poetry. When a 'proper' Latin poet called Venantius Fortunatus turned up at court from Italy, he delighted equally both Roman- and Frankish-descended grandees pres-ent. This individual made a career out of singing for his supper, his party piece being elegant couplets in praise of the dessert. Despite this, neither kind of grandee bothered any more with a full Latin education. They did teach their children to read and write, but their aims were more limited. As a result, by about 600, writing was confined to clerics, while secular elites tended to be content just to be able to read, especially their Bibles; they no longer saw writing as an essential part of their identity. It was the Roman state which, again not very deliberately, had created and maintained the context in which widespread secular literacy was an essential component of eliteness, and with the passing of that state, new patterns of literacy evolved.[12]

A similar point can be made about Christianity. The Christianiza-tion of first the Mediterranean world, then of the broader reaches of central, eastern and northern Europe in the first millennium, is sometimes seen as a transformation entirely unaffected by the collapse of Rome. There is some truth to this notion, but it can also mislead. The Christian religion has always evolved, certainly institutionally, according to contemporary contexts. As we saw in Chapter 3, the Romanization of Christianity was as important an historical phenom-enon as the Christianization of the Empire. Thanks to the emperor Constantine and his successors, imperially funded meetings of Christian leaders were able to define most of the religion's doctrines from the early fourth century onwards. The Church also developed a very particular hierarchy of bishops, archbishops and patriarchs whose geographical locations largely reflected the Empire's administrative structure of local and regional capitals. Nor did Christian Roman emperors step back one iota from the claim made by their pagan predecessors that they had been appointed by the Divinity - they simply re-identified that Divinity as the Christian God. So they had

every right, as they saw it, to involve themselves in the operation of the Church at all levels. And they duly did so, calling councils, making laws, and interfering in senior appointments.

Christianity as it evolved within the structures of the Empire was thus very different from what it had been before Constantine's conversion, and the disappearance of the Roman state profoundly changed it yet again. For one thing, the boundaries of the new kingdoms failed in some cases to respect the hierarchies of late Roman administration. Bishops thus sometimes found themselves in one kingdom, and their archbishops in another. Successive archbishops of Arles, which was part of the Visigothic kingdom but whose metropolitan control extended into the Burgundian, fell foul of their kings who, suspicious of their cross-border contacts, removed them from their posts. There was change, too, of an intellectual kind. In the Roman world, leading laymen – who were as well if not better educated than the clergy – often contributed to religious debate. But with the disappearance of widespread literacy, laymen soon ceased to be able to do so, and the intellectual world of the early medieval Church became a solidly clerical one. This would not have happened, had laymen remained as educated as clerics. Equally important, post-Roman kings inherited from their predecessors the claim to religious authority, and took it upon themselves to appoint bishops and call councils. As a result, Christianity operated at this time in what Peter Brown has called 'Christian microcosms'. There was no single, unified Church; rather, the boundaries of post-Roman kingdoms defined working regional subgroupings, and these Church communities within the different kingdoms had relatively little to do with one another.[13]

Above all, the rise of the medieval papacy as an overarching authority for the whole of western Christendom is inconceivable without the collapse of the Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages, popes came to play many of the roles within the Church that Christian Roman emperors had appropriated to themselves – making laws, calling councils, making or influencing important appointments. Had western emperors of the Roman type still existed, it is inconceivable that popes would have been able to carve out for themselves a position of such independence. In the east, where emperors still ruled, successive Patriarchs of Constantinople, whose legal and administrative position was modelled on that of the Roman papacy, found it impossible to act other than as imperial yes-men. Appointed by the emperors

at will, they tended to be ex imperial bureaucrats highly receptive to imperial orders.[14]

The Components of Collapse

IN PRESENTING my own take on the reasons for the collapse of the west Roman Empire, I find myself lined up against one of the oldest historical traditions of all – in English writing, certainly. Famously, Edward Gibbon emphasized internal factors:

The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and, as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight.

Gibbon's analysis picked up from where the Greek writer Polybius left off. Polybius, like most ancient historians, saw individual moral virtue or vice as the main moving force behind historical causation. The Roman Republic rose to greatness because of the self-discipline of its leaders, went his argument, and started to fall from grace when the excesses produced by success fed through to corrupt their descendants. Polybius was writing in the second century BC, long before the Empire reached its full extent, let alone started to shed territories. Picking up his general line of argument, Gibbon, addressing the subject of Christianity, saw it as contributing massively to the tale of woe. For him, the new religion sowed internal division within the Empire through its doctrinal disputes, encouraged social leaders to drop out of political participation by becoming monks, and, by advocating a 'turn-the-other-cheek' policy, helped undermine the Roman war machine.[15]

There may be something to be said for this way of thinking but there is one counter-argument that relegates it to no more than a footnote in the debate. Any account of the fall of the western Roman Empire in the fifth century must take full stock of the fact that the eastern Empire not only survived, but actually prospered in the sixth. All the evils identified in the western system applied equally, if not more, to the eastern. If anything, the Roman east was more Christian, and more given to doctrinal argument. Also, it operated the same kind

of governmental system over the same kind of economy. Yet the east survived, when the west fell. This alone makes it difficult to argue that there was something so inherently wrong with the late imperial system that it was bound to collapse under its own weight. And if you start looking for differences between east and west that might explain their different fates, accidents of geography are what come most immediately to mind. The richest provinces of the east, the band stretching from Asia Minor to Egypt, were well protected by Constantinople against invaders from the north and east, whereas the western Empire had most of the Rhine and Danube frontier line to protect, and we have seen what hazards that threw up.

Both of these points were made by two earlier commentators, N. H. Baynes and A. H. M. Jones;[16] but since Jones was writing – forty years ago – it has become more necessary, I would argue, in any account of the collapse of the Roman west, to shine the spotlight on the barbarian-immigrant issue. This is for two reasons. First, the only factor that Jones saw as playing any real role in the different fates of east and west was their relative prosperity. In his view, overtaxation crippled the late Roman economy. Peasants were not being left with a large enough share of their yearly produce to feed themselves and their families, so that both population and output saw steady, if unspectacular, decline. This, he believed, was especially true in the west.[17] Jones's view of the late Roman economy was entirely based, however, on written, above all legal, sources. As he wrote, the French archaeologist Georges Tchalenko was publishing the account of his revolutionary trove of prosperous late Roman villages in the limestone hills behind Antioch (see pp. 112–13); and since Jones wrote, rural surveys, as we saw in Chapter 3, have completely recast our view of the late Roman economy. We know that in the fourth century, taxes were certainly not high enough to undermine peasant subsistence. In the west as well as the east, the late Empire was a period of agricultural boom, with no sign of an overall population decline. The east may still have been richer, of course, but there was no major internal economic crisis at play in the Roman world before the fifth century. Equally important, understanding that both moments of frontier crisis, 376–80 and 405–8, had the same non-Roman cause, and reconstructing the detailed narrative of subsequent imperial collapse from 405 to 476, underline the central role played by outside immigrants in the story of western collapse.

All this said, there is no serious historian who thinks that the western Empire fell entirely because of internal problems, or entirely because of exogenous shock. The emphasis of this book has been primarily on the latter, because in my view the growth of Hunnic power in Europe has been misunderstood and, with it, the intimate link between the arrival of the Huns and the deposition of Romulus Augustulus. To explore more fully the interaction of the Hun-generated invasions with the nature of the Roman imperial system, however, let's start by taking another look at the invaders.

THE INVADERS OF the late fourth and fifth centuries came in pretty large numbers. Ancient sources being what they are, the entire hundred years' worth of writings, from 376 to 476, offers us no precise figures for any of the barbarian groups involved in the action, let alone an appreciation of the global threat they posed. Some scholars would argue that the sources are so feeble on this front that it is pointless even trying to estimate their size. This is a justifiable stance, but some of the better sources do offer us plausible-looking figures, which suggest at least an order of magnitude for some of the invading groups and, occasionally, indirect ways of estimating their size. From these indications, my best guesses would be along the following lines.

The Tervingi and Greuthungi who appeared on the northern bank of the Danube in 376 could probably each put about 10,000 fighting men into the field. Radagaisus' force which invaded Italy in 405/6 was probably larger than these groups individually – maybe 20,000 fighting men. Taken together, these figures are broadly in line with other indications that, when he had united all three, Alaric could muster over 30,000 fighters.[18] When they crossed to North Africa, the military capacity of the united Vandals and Alans was seemingly in the region of 15–20,000, but that was after hard fighting and takes no account of the Suevi. In total, therefore, the Rhine invaders of 406 may, again, have numbered 30,000-plus fighting men. The Burgundians who converged on the Rhine in 410 are still harder to gauge. Compared with the Visigoths of the mid-450s, they only ever rated as a second-rank power, so their military capacity must have been lower, perhaps in the region of 15,000-plus fighters, but this was after their traumatic defeat at the hands of the Huns in the 430s.[19] Beyond this, we simply don't know how many Sciri, Rugi and Herules moved over with Odovacar to the Roman army of Italy as the Hunnic Empire collapsed in the

460s. They certainly numbered thousands, up to 10,000, perhaps. Roughly, therefore, the main invaders of the west might have amounted to 40,000 Goths (in the two waves of 376 and 405/6), 30,000 Rhine invaders, maybe 15,000 Burgundians, and another 10,000 refugees from Attila's collapsing empire. To this figure of 95,000 fighting men we would need to add whatever might be represented by various smaller groups, especially the Alans who didn't follow Geiseric to Africa, and, above all, the Frankish forces who from the mid-460s played an increasingly prominent role in Gallic politics. Although after 476 the Franks quickly became powerful enough to rival the Visigoths for dominance in Gaul, in the events leading up to the deposition of Romulus Augustulus, probably no more than 10–15,000 Franks were active. Overall, this suggests that around 110–120,000 armed outsiders played some part in bringing down the western Empire.[20]

On the one hand, narrative reconstruction leaves no room for doubt that the centrifugal forces generated by the intruders from outside fragmented the western Roman Empire into the new kingdoms of the late fifth century. On the other, these groups each weighed in at a few tens, not hundreds, of thousands of fighting men. This does not amount, at first sight, to an overwhelming level of force, especially when you remember that even the most conservative estimates would reckon the Roman army in AD 375 at 300,000 men, and some at double that figure. In a way, the narrative sequence confirms the point. The western Empire was not blown away in one moment of conquest, as for instance the Chinese Empire would be later at the hands of the Mongols. Initially, the immigrants had just enough military power to establish their enclaves, but the further expansion that created the independent kingdoms was a drawn-out process, taking two to three generations fully to erode the power of the Roman state. Another way of putting this is that, even in aggregate, the fifth-century invaders were not numerous enough to bring down just any Empire that we might imagine in control of the human and other resources of all the territory from Hadrian's Wall to the Atlas Mountains. They were able to push the western Empire from a state of relative health into non-existence only because they interacted in specific ways with the inherent military, economic and political limitations of the Roman system as it stood after half a millennium of evolution.

Considering the Empire's military capacity first of all, the invasions generated by the Huns have to be seen in relation to the rise of

Sasanian Persia to superpower status in the third century AD. As we saw in Chapter 2, Persia was eventually contained. However, containment did not remove the Persian Empire's power. Even after stability was restored to the eastern frontier by about the year 300, the military effort there could never be allowed to slacken, and upwards of 40 per cent of the eastern Empire's armies (20–25 per cent of the total east and west Roman military force) had always to be pointed at the Persians. The late fourth-century crisis on the Empire's European frontiers thus applied unwelcome pressure on a military structure that had already been subject to heavy strain.

A large proportion of the rest of the Roman army also consisted of garrison forces (limitanei), whose remit was essentially to deal with immediate, low-grade threats to frontier security. All had other duties and some may have lacked the training and equipment to make them of much use against the concentrated forces now generated by the Huns. Overall, then, the military capacity of the invaders needs to be measured not against the total armed forces of the Empire as a whole, for many units were fully committed to other tasks, but against the field armies of the west. These were grouped together largely in Gaul, Italy and western Illyricum, and amounted, in 420, to 181 units: on paper, upwards of 90,000 men. (At the onset of the crisis, the western field army probably numbered no more than 160 units, or 80,000-plus men.) Compared with this force, the number of intrusive barbarians starts to loom much larger, and it is easier to appreciate why they were eventually able to prevail. Far from being outnumbered, they probably enjoyed – between them – a not insignificant numerical advantage over imperial forces. This was hidden, initially, by the invaders' lack of unity, but numbers slowly told as the fifth century progressed.

If the incoming barbarians were sufficiently numerous eventually to overcome that section of the Roman army that could be pointed in their direction, why didn't the Empire simply raise more troops? The answer to this question lies in the limitations of its economy. As we have seen, late Roman agriculture was, if anything, booming in the fourth century, but there was no obvious means of quickly or substantially increasing output. In many provinces, the economy was operating at maximal levels of output. It is unlikely, therefore, that there was much extra slack left by the year 400 to fund still larger armies after the major increases in tax extracted a century earlier to

fund the new armies required on the Persian front. The Empire's tax-take was also slightly limited by its bureaucratic capacity and the willingness of local elites to pay, but there is little sign that it was having much trouble with taxpayers before the 440s, when Aetius had to rein in tax privileges after the loss of North Africa. The most significant limitation on taxation would appear to be the buoyant but plateaued economy.

Political limitations, on the other hand, are directly relevant in another way to the story of western collapse. A relatively simple political deal, as we saw earlier, bound together Roman centre and locality. In return for tax payments, the machinery of the state, military and legal, protected a relatively small landowning class from both outside enemies and internal ones. Because their dominance was based on landowning, these people were vulnerable. They could not up sticks should the imperial centre cease to be able to guarantee their security, so it is hardly surprising that they tended to ingratiate themselves with the rising barbarian powers. This limitation within the system played a considerable role in shaping the nature of imperial collapse in the old Roman heartlands of central and southern Gaul and Spain.

Another political limitation relates to the operation of high politics. By virtue of the Empire's massive size and its previous success in Romanizing provincial elites, late Roman ruling regimes faced constant pressure from local interest groups, all pulling in different directions. By the fourth century power thus needed to be shared between more than one emperor, but there was no tried and trusted recipe for doing this successfully; all regimes were in this sense improvisations. At the centre, power could be distributed in various ways, such as between two emperors or more; or by means of puppet emperors whose strings were pulled by powerful men such as Aetius or Stilicho. Moments, even a decade or two, of political stability could ensue, but would tend to be punctuated by periods of brutal infighting, often ending in civil war. And instability at the centre gave the immigrants precious opportunities to advance their own interests.

Internal limitations must be given their due weight, then, but anyone who argues that they played a primary role in the Empire's collapse and that the barbarians were no more than an irritant hurrying the process along, has to explain exactly how the imperial edifice could have crumbled in the absence of massive military assault from outside.

And this, it seems to me, is very hard to do. It is not that the late Empire had a perfect political system. It encompassed many centrifugal tendencies, even before the advent of the barbarians, and some outlying areas were a lot less integrated into its structures than were the Mediterranean heartlands. Britain, in particular, showed a marked tendency to throw up dissident political movements, and to judge by the amount of banditry recorded there, north-western Gaul (Armorica) may have been similar. What happened with these revolts is instructive. First, they flared up only when there was instability at the centre; and all the Empire had to do was to send out a modest expeditionary force – in the case of Britain – to bring the province back into the fold. In 368, Count Theodosius, father of the first emperor by that name, managed the task with only four regiments.[21] For the Empire to have fallen apart on its own, therefore, a critical number of localities would have had to rebel simultaneously, each carrying with it enough of the Roman army to make it impossible for the centre to reconquer the rebels piecemeal.

Such a sequence of events, analogous to those which broke up the western half of the Carolingian world in the ninth century, is impossible to imagine in the fourth, precisely because the Roman Empire differed in some fundamental ways from the Carolingian. In the Carolingian Empire, the army consisted of local landowners leading armed contingents of their own retainers, whereas the Roman Empire operated with a professional army. When localities broke away from the Carolingian Empire, they already had their own ready-made armies. Roman landowners, by contrast, were civilian, and had to struggle to put together enough of a force in their locality to defend themselves from predation from the centre. Not only Britain, therefore, but northern Gaul, Spain and North Africa would have had to break away simultaneously to make internal collapse conceivable, and there is no sign of centrifugal pressure within the late Empire on anything like this scale. To my mind, rather than talking of internal Roman 'weaknesses' predestining the late imperial system to collapse, it makes more sense to talk of 'limitations' – military, economic and political – which made it impossible for the west to deal with the particular crisis it faced in the fifth century. These internal limitations were a necessary factor in, but not by themselves sufficient cause for, imperial collapse. Without the barbarians, there is not the slightest evidence that the western Empire would have ceased to exist in the fifth century.

Exogenous Shock

IN BRINGING this study of the destruction of the Roman west to a close, there is one final line of thought that I would like to explore. The exogenous shock, referred to earlier, had two components: the Huns who generated it, and the largely Germanic groups who caught its momentum and whose invasions fatally holed the west Roman ship of state. As far as we can tell, there is no deep-seated reason why the Huns should have moved into the lands north of the Black Sea at the precise moment they did. In the ancient and medieval periods, the Great Eurasian Steppe threw up from time to time militarily significant pulses of population. Sometimes these pressed eastwards towards China, sometimes westwards into Europe. The dynamics of this movement are still insufficiently understood for us to have a clear idea of any general underlying reasons that might explain why these pulses occurred when they did, or whether each had its own entirely individual explanation. In the case of the Huns, we can do no more than outline a few possibilities. These range from the environmental (the steppes becoming drier, and so less able to support livestock); to sociopolitical change; to military contingency (their having a more powerful bow). But as things stand, we have no more idea why the Huns moved west in the later fourth century than why the Sarmatians did the same around the birth of Christ.[22]

The Huns themselves, though, were only part of the problem. The more immediate and damaging component of the Hunnic crisis was the largely Germanic groups who forced their way across the imperial frontier in the two major waves of 376-80 and 405-8. If we can't get any further with the Huns, the interaction between steppe nomad and Germanic agriculturalist merits more attention, because its effects were, from a broader historical perspective, unique. In the first century AD, Sarmatian nomads similarly assaulted some Germanic-dominated agricultural societies at the eastern end of the Carpathians, and some of these Sarmatians eventually moved, like the Huns would, on to the Great Hungarian Plain. Despite these similarities, however, the arrival of the Sarmatians generated no knock-on effects remotely resembling the exodus of Goths, Vandals, Alans and others on to Roman soil some four hundred years later.[23] Why was this?

The likely explanation for this difference lies in the transformation

of the Germanic world that had occurred between the first and the fourth centuries. As we saw in Chapter 2, first-century Germania was divided into many small, competitive political units, whose overall poverty was such that the Romans didn't think them worth conquering. At this time Germania could put together raiding parties and larger defensive alliances that might well successfully ambush a Roman army wandering in a forest, as Arminius did with Varus' legions in AD 9. But it possessed no political structure capable of standing up to Roman might and diplomatic manipulation in extended open conflict. By the time the Huns arrived, much had changed. An economic revolution, above all in agricultural production but also in certain manufactured goods, had generated both a much larger population and new wealth. Social stratification had increased, with a dominant free class, hereditary princes and armed retinues. This social change manifested itself at the top in the form of more robust political structures. By the fourth century, subsections of the Alamanni and Goths, amongst others, functioned as client states on the fringes of the Roman world. For the most part complaisant, they could nevertheless take action, when they thought it necessary, to limit the demands that the Empire made upon them.

As Germanic groups moved on to Roman territory to escape Hunnic aggression, this long-standing process of sociopolitical amalgamation acquired new momentum. One of the most important – and much discussed in this book – but least thought about phenomena of the fifth-century narrative is that all of the major successor states to the west Roman Empire were created around the military power of new barbarian supergroups, generated on the march. The Visigoths who settled in Aquitaine in the 410s were not an ancient subdivision of the Gothic world, but a new creation. Before the arrival of the Huns on the fringes of Europe, Visigoths – and don't let any old-style maps of the invasions convince you otherwise – did not exist. They were created by the unification of the Tervingi and Greuthungi, who had arrived at the Danube in 376, with the survivors of Radagaisus' force who attacked Italy in 405/6. Alaric's ambition brought the survivors of all three groups together, and created a new and much larger grouping than any previously seen in the Gothic world.[24] The Vandals who conquered Carthage in 439, likewise, were a new political entity. In this case, the new unit was generated out of just one pulse of migration, the invaders who crossed the Rhine at the end of 406.

These originally comprised a loose alliance of two separate groups of Vandals – Hasdings and Silings – an unknown number of Alanic groups (the largest force), and Suevi, who were probably the product of a renewed alliance among some of the Germani of the Middle Danube. Under Romano-Gothic military assault in the mid-410s, a new entity emerged: the Siling Vandals, and various Alans attached themselves to the Hasding Vandal ruling line.

At a later date, the emergence of a Frankish Gallic kingdom was made possible only by a similar realignment among the Franks. The Franks have not figured much in our narrative of Roman imperial collapse, essentially because they are an effect rather than a cause of the process. They start to feature as a significant force on Roman soil only from the mid-460s, by which time Roman power was already on the wane in northern Gaul. That their unification was intimately linked to Roman collapse isn't demonstrable, but it's highly likely. In the fourth century, Roman policy towards the Franks' southern neighbours in the Rhine frontier region, the Alamanni, was in part directed towards preventing the build-up of militarily dangerous political confederations. If the same was true of the Franks, it will have become significantly easier for political amalgamation to have occurred among the Franks as Roman power declined in the region. And certainly, the force of Frankish warriors that Clovis used after about AD 480 to bring about a united Gallic kingdom from the Garonne to the Channel, was created by the unification of at least six separate warbands. To that inherited from his father Childeric, Clovis added those of Sigibert (and his son Chloderic), Chararic, Ragnachar and Ricchar (brothers, but seemingly with their own followings) and Rignomer.[23] In the same way, the Ostrogoths, who deposed Odovacar in 492 to create the last of the successor states, were also a recent creation. Theoderic the Amal, first Ostrogothic king of Italy, completed the process begun by his uncle Valamer. In the 450s Valamer united some Gothic warbands, much as Clovis did among the Franks, to create one of the successor kingdoms to the Hunnic Empire in the Middle Danubian region. At this stage, the group numbered upwards of 10,000 or so. In the 480s, Theoderic united this force with another of more or less the same size: the Thracian Goths, previously settled in the eastern Balkans. It was this united force that then conquered Italy.[24]

It is worth taking a closer look at the process of reorganization into larger and more cohesive units from which the successor king-

doms sprang. In all cases, unification took place amidst a cacophony of dynastic rivalry. On the one hand, the process was fired by warband leaders readily killing each other off. Clovis, in particular, seems to have enjoyed the merry crack of axe on skull, and individual feuding was certainly rampant. On the other hand, although killing each other had always been popular with Germanic warband leaders, this had never before produced such major realignments in their society. Just as important as the leaders' individual ambitions, therefore, were the attitudes of the warriors witnessing the spectacle. Gregory of Tours' account of Clovis' unification of the Franks emphasizes that, with pretty much every assassination, the dead leader's followers declared themselves ready to ally with Clovis. And they did, of course, have a real choice. This applies equally to all the other unifications. The Visigoths were created not only by Alaric's ambition, but also by the willingness of most of the Tervingi and the Greuthungi, plus the defeated followers of Radagaisus, to attach themselves to his standard. The Vandal coalition, as we saw, came into existence when the Siling Vandals and the Alans decided to throw in their lot with the Hasdings and the Ostrogoths on the back of positive responses to the individual successes, over two generations, of Valamer and Theoderic. In some of these cases, we know of a few individuals who decided not to join the new alliances. Rather than focusing just on the leadership struggles, then, we need to think about the choices being made by the Germanic freemen, whose decisions turned the usual leadership rivalries into a process of political unification.[27]

We know from the available information that the Roman Empire played a critical role in this process on two levels. First, as the pre-eminent military power of the age, over the centuries it had developed tried and trusted methods for undermining the independence even of immigrants it welcomed. Faced with such power combined with the Empire's self-image as a society superior to all others, many of the immigrants newly arrived within the Empire became immediately aware of very good reasons, whatever their past divisions, to join forces. The Tervingi and Greuthungi were already cooperating as early as the summer of 376, when Valens tried to divide and rule them by allowing only the Tervingi into the Empire. Those in Radagaisus' following who were sold into slavery immediately after his defeat, or saw their wives and children massacred in Italian cities after the assassination of Stilicho, were quick to grasp the logic of attaching

themselves to Alaric's following. And it was after major defeats that the Siling Vandals and Alans joined the Hasding Vandals, precisely to resist more effectively the campaigns being mounted against them by Constantius. The creation of the Ostrogoths, likewise, was marked by a thrilling moment in the summer of 478 when the emperor Zeno tried to make Theoderic the Amal fight the Thracian Goths. The emperor pretended that he would lend him a substantial force to help him defeat his rivals, while actually wanting the two Gothic forces to do each other serious damage, before sending in an imperial army to mop up. In the event, despite the two groups' leaders being at loggerheads, the rank and file refused to fight, well aware of the path to mutual destruction that Zeno had mapped out for them.[24]

Second, the Roman Empire operated a powerful redistributive tax machinery. This fact was exploited by Goths and others who made the Empire – more and less willingly – recognize them as allies, or picked off pieces of it in the form of revenue-generating city territories, to secure a level of income that was not available outside the Empire. For all its economic advances, the Germanic world of the fourth century remained relatively unproductive compared with the Empire. As we saw in Chapter 7, gold only appears in any abundance in Germanic burials from the time of Attila, who had exacted it in unprecedented amounts from the Roman state. For the adventurous, the Roman Empire, while being a threat to their existence, also presented an unprecedented opportunity to prosper. When it came to exacting riches by force, alien groups who could mobilize large armed forces again stood a better chance of achieving their aim. The precise admixture of fear and anticipated profit varied, but one way or another, a heady cocktail of the two fired all these migrants towards unification. There is a very real sense in which, once the Huns had pushed large numbers of them across the frontier, the Roman state became its own worst enemy. Its military power and financial sophistication both hastened the process whereby streams of incomers became coherent forces capable of carving out kingdoms from its own body politic.

This argument also, I think, can be taken one step further. If the Huns had arrived in the first century AD instead of the fourth, and had pushed Germanic groups of the kind that then existed across the Roman frontier, the result would have been very different. Because of the smaller size of their political units in the first century, too many of them would have had to be involved in too complicated a

process of realignment to make the creation of large alliances at all likely. The three or four, maybe half a dozen, units that made up each fifth-century supergroup provided enough manpower to create a military force of 20–30,000 warriors – probably the minimum for long-term survival. To get that many Germanic warriors pointing in the same direction in the first century, you would have had to unite perhaps up to a dozen rival units, and the political problem involved would have been huge. This, I would argue, is why the Sarmatian movements in the first century created so much less of an impact than the Huns' did 300 years later.

The transformations separating fourth- from first-century Germanic society are thus a crucial factor in the story of western collapse. But what caused them? Why and how did this society change so radically? Of the internal dynamics operating within Germanic society in these centuries, the sources – all Roman, of course – give no more than a hint. Tacitus in the first century and Ammianus Marcellinus in the fourth both mention violent struggles taking place between different groups of Germani, with no Roman involvement, and there is no reason to think this exceptional. Be that as it may, to my mind the key is the relations between Germania and the Roman Empire, on many levels, some of which we have touched on. With no judgement implied on their relative merits – let's not forget that the Roman Empire had central heating, but saw nothing amiss in feeding human beings to wild animals for the pleasure of the multitude – the Germanic world can be said to have been a relatively simple society located at the edge of a more complex one. The close geographical proximity of such disparate entities was bound to promote precisely the kind of changes that we have observed in the Germanic world.

The most obvious relationship, and one that has attracted plenty of attention from archaeologists, was economic, and the evidence for substantial economic exchange between Germanic societies and the Roman Empire is impressive. High-quality items of Roman manufacture became early on in the period a feature of rich burials in the far Germanic world beyond the frontier zone. Within the frontier zone, about two hundred kilometres wide, more ordinary Roman products were part and parcel of everyday life. In return, the written evidence suggests, the Roman Empire consumed large quantities of raw materials from across the frontier. At one point in the fourth century the emperor Julian used punitive diplomatic treaties to extract from

various Alamannic groups wood, foodstuffs and manpower (both slaves and recruits for his army), on other occasions, such goods and services were paid for. Roman frontier garrisons had for centuries served as centres of demand for nearby German economies. The perishable exports produced by the Germanic world are not archaeologically visible, but they certainly generated enough wealth to matter. A major slave trade, for instance, operated out of Germania. As early as the first century AD, Rome's neighbours on the Rhine were using Roman silver coins as means of exchange, and even when 300 years later relations between the Empire and the Tervingi were more distant, trading stations remained open. We know, too, that it was common for individuals from beyond the frontier to sign up with the Roman army and then return home with their retirement bonuses.[29]

The Germanic world at the time of Christ operated largely as a subsistence economy. The effect of the subsequent four hundred years of trading was broadly twofold. First, wealth in new forms and unprecedented quantities entered Germania from across the Roman frontier. Economic ties with Rome offered unheard-of profits for everyone from slave-traders to agriculturalists selling foodstuffs to Roman garrison troops. For the first time, consequently, there was enough money around to generate real differences in wealth. Second — and more important than the mere fact of wealth — the new economic exchanges led to sociopolitical change, as particular groups jostled for control of the new riches flowing across the frontier. In AD 50, King Vannius of the Marcomanni, whose kingdom was situated beside the Danube in what is now the Czech Republic, was driven out by an enterprising group of adventurers from central and northern Poland. As Tacitus tells us,[30] they came south to claim a share in the trade-generated wealth he had amassed in the course of a thirty-year reign. Just as with the Mafia and Prohibition, a new flow of wealth was there to be fought over, until arguments were settled and all parties accepted that the current distribution of percentages reflected the prevailing balance of power. We generally hear nothing, of course, about the organization of trade links and who was gaining what, from Germania, because no one there was literate. In recent years, however, Polish archaeologists investigating the northern reaches of the Amber Route, which during the Roman period brought this semi-precious stone from the shores of the Baltic to Mediterranean workshops, have uncovered a series of causeways and bridges. Carbon and tree-ring dates identify

these as of the early centuries AD, and show that they were maintained for over 200 years. Someone in northern Poland was making enough money on their percentage of the amber trade, therefore, to go to a great deal of trouble. It's also a pretty fair guess that most of the money was not being made by those who were cutting down trees and sinking logs into bogs. Organizing and controlling trade exchanges led naturally to greater social differentiation, as particular groups in Germanic society tried to grab the profits.[31]

Military and diplomatic relations pushed Germanic society in the same direction. For the first twenty years of the first century AD Rome's legions attempted to conquer its new eastern and northern neighbours. The Empire's attitude at this point was straightforwardly predatory, the Germani responding as you might expect. The first significant political coalition we know about in the Rhine region was put together by Arminius to fight off Roman intrusion. It achieved one great victory over Varus' legions, but then failed to hold together. As we saw in Chapter 2, over the next three centuries Roman policy towards those of its Germanic neighbours living within a hundred kilometres or so of the frontier involved punitive campaigns, perhaps one every generation, which formed the basis for interim peace settlements. In other words, four times a century the Roman legions invaded this hinterland, destroying everything and everyone that did not submit to them. Hardly surprising, then, if we find there a current of resistance. For a start, the Gothic Tervingi did not want to take on board the Christian religion of the emperor Constantius II, and for three years under Athanaric fought a successful holding action to avoid providing military contingents for Rome's wars against Persia. There is every reason to suppose that the desire to fend off the worst excesses of Roman imperialism had a lot to do with the evolution of the larger social structures that characterized the fourth century, which in turn made the new barbarian coalitions which formed in the fifth century on Roman soil possible.

Not, of course, that the violence was all one-sided. Rich pickings were available to those who could organize successful raids across the border (the frontier provinces were even quicker to develop economically than their Germanic neighbours). This provided yet another stimulus to political amalgamation since, generally speaking, the larger the group doing the raiding, the greater its chances of success. And border raiding was endemic, as we know, to Romano-German relations

throughout the imperial period. Of the twenty-four years (354-78) covered by Ammianus Marcellinus, the Rhine frontier was disturbed by the Alamanni during no fewer than fourteen of them. Nor, I think, is it an accident that Alamannic over-kings of the fourth century, like Chnodomarius whom the emperor Julian defeated at Strasbourg in 357, tended to go in for predatory warfare across the frontier. The prestige and wealth gained from this kind of activity were part and parcel of sustaining their position. Whether with a view to fighting off Roman aggression, therefore, or to profiting from Roman wealth, coalition was the likely route to success. The internal adjustments set in motion by both the positive and the negative aspects of the Romano-German relationship pushed Germanic society towards larger size and greater cohesion. Whether the new coalitions that appeared in west Germania in the early third century were motivated primarily by fear or by the anticipation of profit, it is evident the power and wealth of the Roman Empire were in everyone's sights.

Once these more powerful coalitions had come into existence, Roman diplomatic practice tended to further the process. A tried and trusted tactic was to alight on a leader who was willing to help keep the peace, then seek to promote his hold over his subjects by targeted foreign aid, combined, very often, with trading privileges. Annual gifts were a feature of Roman foreign policy from the early centuries AD. But there was always some ambiguity in these relationships; favoured kings had to respond to the demands of their own followers, as well as those of their new imperial sponsors. More than one king of the Alamanni found himself forced by his followers to join in Chnodomarius' rebellion or face demotion.[32] Inevitably, leaders who could attract Roman largesse were likely to attract the largest number of followers.

Roman weaponry also played its part. It is unclear how the arms trade was carried on, but more Roman weapons have been found in Danish bog deposits than anywhere else in Europe.[33] The conclusion can only be that this particular type of Roman hardware was used in local conflict well beyond the frontier. Having gained control of new sources of wealth and success in organized raids, having received legitimation and other support from the Empire and having acquired decent Roman weaponry, the emergent Germanic dynast was now in a position to extend his power by less peaceful means than hitherto. His energies were partly directed towards Rome, but that fierce inter-Germanic rivalry must also have played its part in building up the

larger power blocks in the Germanic world. Ammianus mentions that Burgundians were willing to be paid to attack Alamanni for a price, for instance, and that one pre-eminent king of the Alamanni, Macrianus, met his end in Frankish territory when a bout of local expansionary warfare went wrong.[34] Over the centuries, there must have been a myriad such wars. We should think of the Roman Empire, then, as having a host of unanticipated effects on the other side of the frontier, as local societies reacted in their own fashion to the dangers and opportunities thrown up by its overwhelming presence. When the amalgamation of groups and subgroups that had been going on for so long beyond Rome's borders interacted with the exogenous shock that was the arrival of the Huns, the supergroups that would tear the western Empire apart came into being.

There is, I suspect, an inbuilt tendency for the kind of dominance exercised by empires to generate an inverse reaction whereby the dominated, in the end, are able to throw off their chains.[35] The Roman Empire had sown the seeds of its own destruction, therefore, not because of internal weaknesses that had evolved over the centuries, nor because of new ones evolved, but as a consequence of its relationship with the Germanic world. Just as the Sasanians were able to reorganize Near Eastern society so as to throw off Roman domination, Germanic society achieved the same in the west, when its collision with Hunnic power precipitated the process much more quickly than would otherwise have been the case. The west Roman state fell not because of the weight of its own 'stupendous fabric', but because its Germanic neighbours had responded to its power in ways that the Romans could never have foreseen. There is in all this a pleasing denouement. By virtue of its unbounded aggression, Roman imperialism was ultimately responsible for its own destruction.